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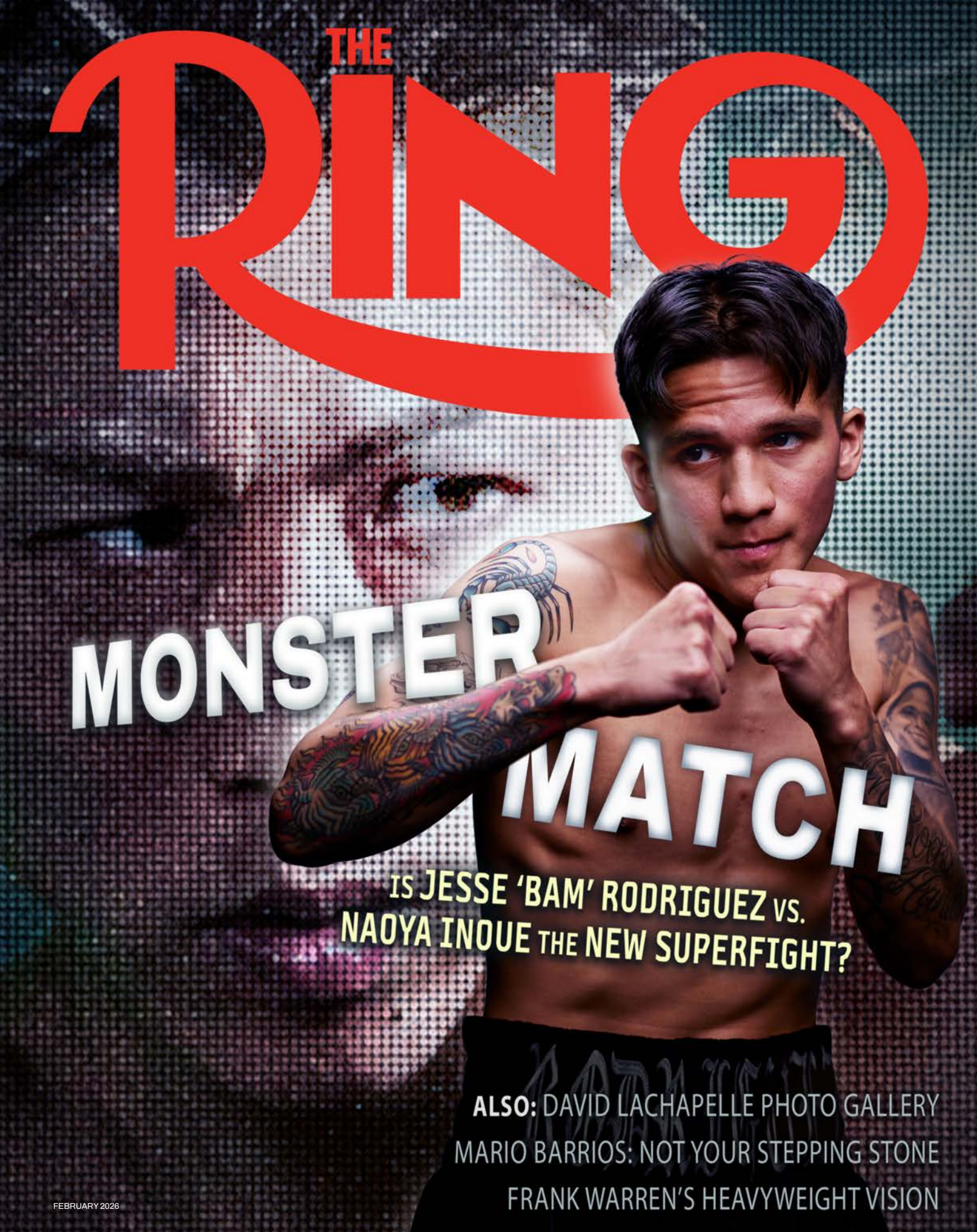

MONSTER MATCH

IS JESSE 'BAM' RODRIGUEZ VS. NAOYA INOUE THE NEW SUPERFIGHT?

ALSO: DAVID LACHAPELLE PHOTO GALLERY

MARIO BARRIOS: NOT YOUR STEPPING STONE

FRANK WARREN'S HEAVYWEIGHT VISION

FEBRUARY 2026

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OPENING SHOT

DRAW THE LINE: For the second time in two fights, Lamont Roach came out on the wrong end of a 12-round majority decision. The former junior lightweight titleholder appeared to get the better of rampaging pressure fighter Isaac "Pitbull" Cruz at the Frost Bank Center in San Antonio in December. However, when the numbers were read for this junior welterweight bout, there was nothing to celebrate. In March, Roach was also deemed very unfortunate not to get the nod against unbeaten lightweight titleholder Gervonta "Tank" Davis.

Omar Vega

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RINGSIDE By Doug Fischer

CRAWFORD VS. THE WBC

Crawford was unwilling to pay $300k in WBC sanctioning fees.

The four major sanctioning bodies hold annual conventions in various parts of the world where they put on workshops and seminars, honor their beltholders, hand out awards and make decisions on their rankings and mandatory title challenges.

None, however, grab the kind of headlines – usually of the cringe-inducing variety – that the World Boxing Council's gatherings seem to command each year.

This year's WBC convention – held in Bangkok during the first week of December – was no exception. The news out of Thailand that garnered the most attention was the Mexico-based organization's decision to strip Terence Crawford of their super middleweight belt due to the unified Ring champ's refusal to pay $300,000 in sanctioning fees following his unanimous decision over Canelo Alvarez.

Crawford's raw retort and the reaction that it elicited from fans, boxers and industry players dominated boxing social media for several days.

When interviewed about the decision, WBC president Mauricio Sulaiman sounded hurt and offended.

"He forgot how he got to make $50 million [vs. Alvarez]," Sulaiman said. "The WBC was instrumental in making that fight, the [championship] ring we made [for him] ... just to receive a slap in the face is sad. It is just terrible. Not even a thank you, or 'I'm sorry.' No response."

Crawford saved his response for his Instagram account, which he used to stream a 17-minute rant titled "Just had to get something off my chest." It was epic but also laced with profanity – many F- and MF-bombs were dropped – so sensitive readers be warned about the highlights you're about to read.

"I got a lot to say," Crawford said while driving his truck to a burger spot in Omaha, R&B group Jagged Edge playing in the background.

"I see Mauricio got a lot to say about me not paying him $300,000, plus another [$100,000] for sanctioning fees, right? Then he gonna tell me I need to apologize. Like who the fuck you think I am?

"Boy, you better slap your fuckin' self. I ain't paying yo ass shit. Fuck you talkin' about pay you $300,000?

"What makes you so motherfuckin' better than any of the other sanctioning bodies? Huh? Answer that question. What makes you better than the WBO, the IBF or the WBA? Everybody accepted what I was giving them but you.

"But you, the WBC, think that you better than everybody. Don't you? So, since you the WBC, and you got the fuckin' green belt – which don't mean fuckin' shit! The fuckin' real belt is the Ring belt, which is FREE, motherfucka – you want me to pay you more than the other sanctioning bodies because you feel like you better than them.

"All the sanctioning bodies agreed to the same amount, but you sit yo motherfuckin' ass up there and say I need to apologize to you.

"The fuck? YOU CAN TAKE THE FUCKIN' BELT! It's a trophy anyway! The fuck am I paying you every time I step foot in the fuckin' ring? It's gonna wear down as the years pass. That don't even make sense.

"I'M the motherfucka putting my life on the line, not you. You ain't steppin your motherfuckin' ass in the ring. You or nobody else.

"So, why should I have to pay to carry your belt? You should be paying me, if you wanna be truthful. You should be payin' me!

"It irks my nerves how this dude gets on a plane, gets a hotel suite, him and his buddies, they go out to dinner, five-star meals, all that, and guess who gotta pay for it? Us fighters! We payin' for y'all to come out here, have the time of y'all life, stay in the best hotels of y'all life, and it's all done on our dime. Do that sound right to y'all? It's crazy, ain't it?

"We the one out there getting battered, knocked upside our head, and every time we step foot in the ring we gotta pay them a sanctioning fee like they the government. We gettin' taxed. It's crazy.

"Listen, you shoulda took the money and you shoulda been thankful and grateful that I was rockin' your belt around as your champion, the WBC champion, the undisputed champion at that. But you wanted to make it about you. You wanted to say you stripped me. I been stripped before. The IBF just stripped me when I was at 147. Doesn't matter. I'm still considered the undisputed champion. I am still THE champion in the division because you know why? The only belt that's recognizable as THE champion is the Ring belt, baby. That's the No. 1 belt in the division. That trumps all belts. And guess what? IT'S FREE! IT'S FREEEEE!!! How you love that? $180,000 – FREE!

"How much your belt cost? I wonder how much your belt cost? Huh? I don't see no receipts on your belt. It's crazy, but y'all be having so much taxes on these belts. You got some nerve. It's crazy that you can sit up there and have all these belts. You got the WBC silver, the interim, whatever belts y'all got, and you taxin' these fighters every time they fight and you claim that you for these fighters. You not for these fighters. You probably worse than the promoters.

"But hey, I wish you the best, you and your company. Turki, I hope y'all get that done, man. So we can all see people like this guy go away from boxing, because they ruinin' the sport with all

A decade ago, Floyd Mayweather Jr. refused to pay WBO sanctioning fees.

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Miguel Cotto declined to pay fees in his final WBC world title fight.

these antics that they do."

Crawford vented about more – from the WBC's arbitrary enforcement of their rules to what he views as favoritism for certain fighters, namely Alvarez – but that was the gist of his denunciation. That last bit about Turki Alalshikh "getting that done" alluded to the launch of Zuffa Boxing, which will not recognize the sanctioning bodies. It's a reference I'm certain the alphabet groups and major promoters viewed as a veiled threat, likely triggering some of the backlash Crawford received.

Eddie Hearn likened what Crawford did to going to a restaurant, ordering an expensive meal and skipping out on the bill. Oscar De La Hoya said Crawford had the sanctioning organizations to thank for his status and must have forgotten where he came from before adding that "the Monopoly money really got to your head."

Nakisa Bidarian, the CEO of Jake Paul's Most Valuable Promotions, stated if Crawford didn't agree with the WBC's rules, he shouldn't have fought for their belt. Some boxers, including Ryan Garcia, echoed this sentiment.

However, as we went to press, Crawford's Instagram post had 128,000 likes, 28,000 forwards and nearly 9,000 comments, mostly from fans who are in favor of his stance.

While not an impartial observer – I'd be lying if I said I wasn't stoked to hear Crawford praise the Ring belt – I'm ambivalent about his actions.

I get why Sulaiman was wounded. The WBC is in the business of collecting sanctioning fees. Everybody in boxing – that includes Bud – knows this. And it's true that some of that revenue goes to charitable causes. I've witnessed this firsthand.

But I also understand where Crawford is coming from. He's been paying the Big Four's sanctioning fees for more than a decade, and now that his exemplary career is winding down he's looking to keep as much of his ring earnings as he can (especially after the IRS, trainers, cornermen, conditioning coaches, nutritionists, management/advisers/attorneys, etc. get their cut or payments from his score).

Other great fighters have done the same.

In July 2015, Floyd Mayweather Jr. allowed the WBO to strip him of the welterweight belt he won by outpointing Manny Pacquiao rather than pay $200,000 in sanctioning fees. (It should be noted that Mayweather held 154-pound belts at the time, which violated WBO rules and forced the organization to make an ultimatum. However, they didn't strip Mayweather until he refused to pay the sanctioning fee.)

Four months later, the WBC stripped Miguel Cotto of their middleweight title the week of his showdown with Alvarez due to the Puerto Rican star's refusal to pay $300,000 in sanctioning fees. (It should be noted that part of Cotto's refusal was due to his having to contribute, per WBC rules, to an $800,000 "step-aside" fee collected by Gennadiy Golovkin.)

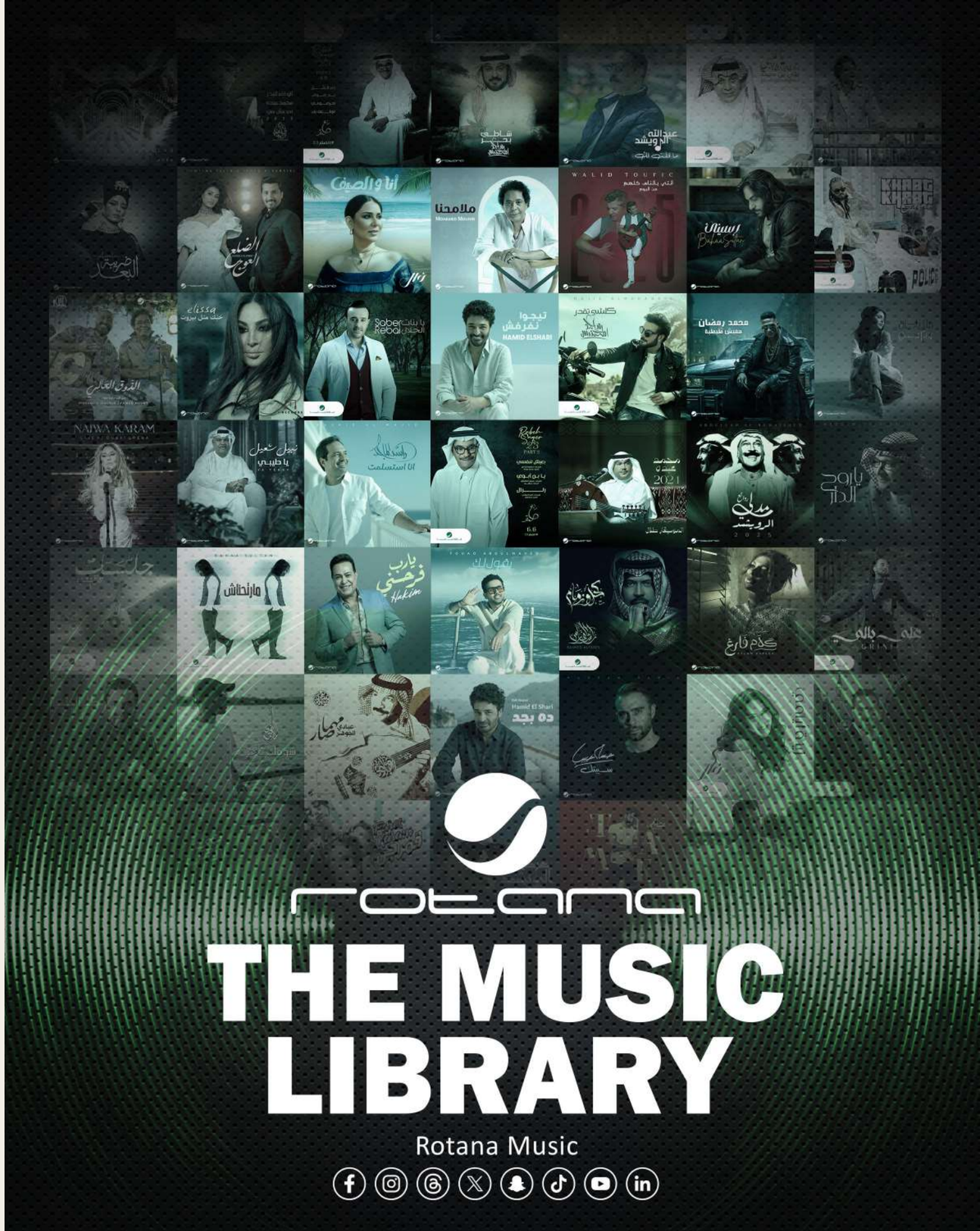
Final thoughts on the matter:

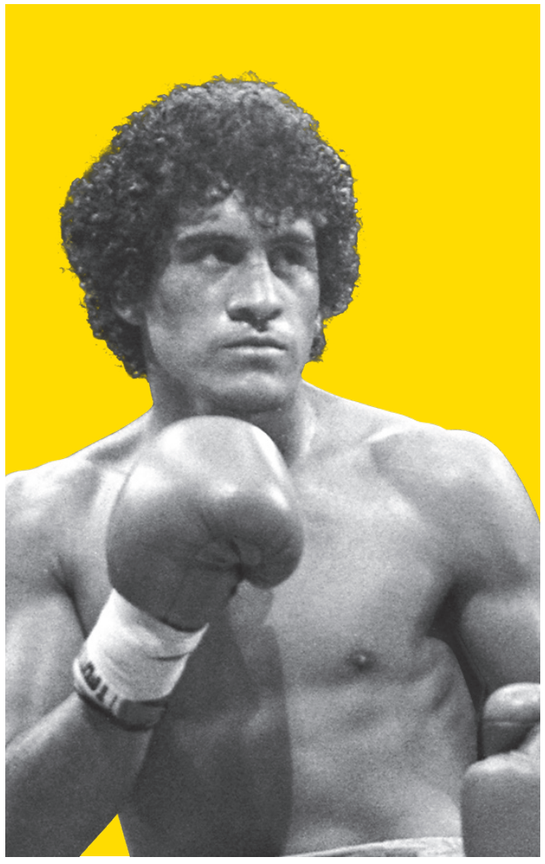
Sulaiman and his fellow alphabet bosses need not worry too much about Crawford's declaration. Mayweather and Cotto were future Hall of Famers making their final – or next to last – monster payday when they allowed themselves to be stripped 10 years prior to Crawford, who is at the same level and juncture, doing the same thing.

Most boxers will not reach their elite stature or pay scales, and they rely on the sanctioning bodies to climb boxing's status ladder.

Having said that, it will be interesting to see how Zuffa Boxing, which launches on January 23, operates without the alphabet organizations and how their existence impacts the rest of the sport.RING

CORRECTION: In some versions of the December 2025 issue, page 45 featured a photo of Yoshimitsu Kimura misidentified as Reito Tsutsumi. The Ring apologizes for the error.





Sanchez and Bam: both pound-for-pound stars in their early 20s.

A TALE OF **TWO KINGS**

By Al Bernstein

This is the story of two remarkable boxers from different eras tied together over a period of more than 40 years by their youth, excellence and historical achievements.

Before his untimely death at age 23, Salvador Sanchez had been on one of the most impressive runs in boxing history, made all the more sensational by the fact that he did it at such a young age. The excellence of that run has seldom if ever been equaled. With changes in the activity level of fighters today and the difficulty of making major matches, it seems unlikely that anyone in this era could do what Sanchez did. Well, no one has. But it's quite fair to say another great young fighter has given us a facsimile of it. That fact alone qualifies Jesse "Bam" Rodriguez as a superstar who is a cinch for the International Boxing Hall of Fame.

Even though the rush to anoint fighters as all-time greats these days is vexing to me, I am not immune to the joyous idea of showing "historical" love to current-day fighters. That is why I can state that the 26-year-old Rodriguez has created this comparison to Sanchez. They fought in different eras, in different divisions and in different styles, but what they each accomplished in a short period of time at a very young age binds them together. At some point it simply occurred to me that this comparison is so utterly appropriate. I hope you see the kinship as I do.

Sanchez's 2½-year run of huge success went from February 2, 1980, to July 21, 1982. Rodriguez's 3½-year odyssey of wins has been from February 5, 2022, to November 22, 2025. Here is what each man accomplished in those periods:

SANCHEZ:

- **Conquered 10 fighters (one twice) with a combined record of 337 wins and 17 losses.**
- **Beat three Hall of Famers in this run by stoppage – Danny "Little Red" Lopez (twice), Wilfredo Gomez and Azumah Nelson.**
- **Won against both Juan Laporte, who would become a renowned titleholder, and perennial top contender Ruben Castillo, who brought a 44-1 record into his fight with Sanchez.**
- **Beat five other good featherweight challengers.**

RODRIGUEZ:

- **Won nine fights against opponents with a combined record of 267-21.**
- **Beat future Hall of Famer Juan Francisco Estrada and two fighters who will certainly be on the Hall of Fame ballot – Carlos Cuadras and Srisaket Sor Rungvisai.**
- **Defeated world titleholders Sunny Edwards, Phumelela Cafu and Fernando Martinez by stoppage.**
- **Beat three very solid title challengers.**

In helping to kick off a decade that is thought of as perhaps the best ever in the sport, Sanchez was an electric performer in the ring. While he never lost in this period, he was always tested by great opponents and his bouts were thrilling, give-and-take affairs. All of us involved with the sport at the time saw this young phenom as the beacon of lower-weight boxers in this exhilarating era. His future, we thought, was unlimited. That was not to be. The sport received a body blow that took its breath away on August 12, 1982, when the 23-year-old Sanchez was killed in a car accident, only three weeks after he beat Azumah Nelson. I remember we were gathered to do the Top Rank Boxing weekly series on ESPN that day, and no one quite knew what to say or how to process it. This event shook the sport to its core. Though his death left his overall boxing journey unfulfilled, it did provide this remarkable 2½-year period where Sanchez left a brilliant partial legacy – one that equals more than most have in a decade of boxing.

Now into the breach in this era comes Bam Rodriguez, who would author a streak of victories that awakens the memories of Sanchez's glorious run. Rodriguez announced himself to the boxing world much as Sanchez did, by taking down a proven warrior. Sanchez surprised longtime champ Danny Lopez, and Rodriguez would do the same to former titleholder Carlos Cuadras. Cuadras was one of the four kings of the flyweight and junior bantamweight divisions. He, along with Roman "Chocolatito" Gonzalez, Juan Francisco Estrada and Srisaket Sor Rungvisai, created excitement with their rivalries and thrilling matches. The 22-year-old Rodriguez crashed the party by beating Cuadras for a vacant belt. He then had the temerity to defeat Sor Rungvisai and Estrada. Almost with ease, he tossed aside three very good titleholders in Sunny Edwards, Phumelela Cafu and Fernando Martinez.

When watching any streak of great wins unfold, the allure and fascination are in what the future might bring. In Sanchez's case, rematches with Gomez and Laporte were in the making, and a superfight with Alexis Arguello was at least possible if Sanchez were to move up in weight at some point. His win over Nelson came when Nelson was 13-0 and very good, but not quite the amazing warrior he would become. Many boxing pundits relished a Sanchez-Nelson reunion in the ring down the road. Nelson was ahead on one of the scorecards when Sanchez stopped him in their spirited battle, and many thought this was a rematch with amazing possibilities.

While all of that went unrealized due to Sanchez's tragic death, today we can relish the blue sky ahead for Rodriguez. There are superfights out there for him as he adds his name to the current pound-for-pound greats in the sport. In fact, one of those pound-for-pounders, Naoya Inoue, is at least a possible target. This is complicated by the fact that Inoue is already a couple of weight divisions above him and thinking of moving up to 126 after his superfight with Junto Nakatani. If Inoue keeps boxing for the next few years and Rodriguez can get high enough in weight, it could be a veteran superstar against a younger superstar still in his prime. More likely to happen is a battle with Nakatani, who is going to be at 122 for a while, whatever the outcome of his Inoue match. Perhaps before those matches, yet another talented Japanese boxer could step forward: 118-pound titleholder Takuma Inoue, Naoya's brother. Imagine how a win would set up the fight with Naoya. All these possible matchups fire the imagination of boxing fans around the world.

I held my powder a little more than others in declaring Rodriguez a generational talent in the sport. I knew he was terrific, of course, but wanted to see a little more. His last three fights, especially his dismantling of an excellent titleholder in Martinez, provided all the evidence necessary. His amazing 3½-year run as a champion at such a young age begs for historical perspective. Perhaps that is why the similar story of Salvador Sanchez rushed into my mind. It is a great joy for those of us who have observed and covered both of these amazing fighters. The feats of Sanchez came at a time when boxing had more impact on the broader sports world. That and his tragic death could be seen as reasons to elevate the perception of his achievements a bit. I assure you, though, that what he did is in no way mythology. It was all astonishingly real and thrilling. And so the mere fact that we can put Rodriguez's journey in the same paragraph with that is the ultimate compliment. And the wonderful part is that Bam's journey gets to continue and fully blossom. We can't wait to see it. RING

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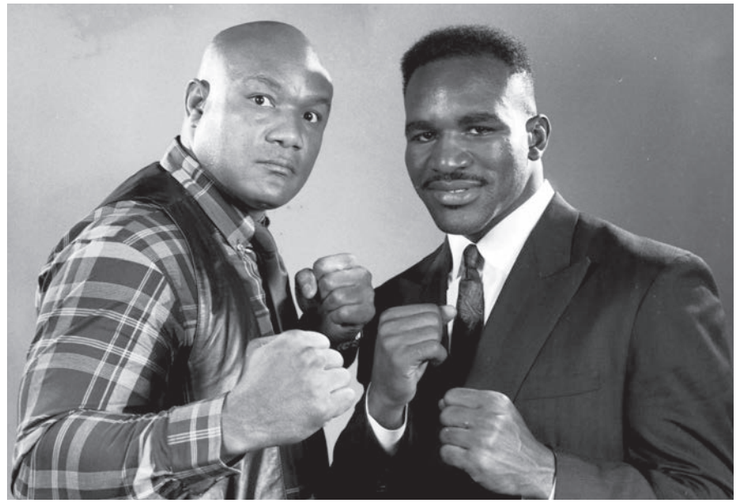
STEVE'S SOAPBOX

THE ULTIMATE QUESTION

By Steve Kim



Holyfield vs. Foreman was the inaugural TVKO pay-per-view event in April 1991.

It was announced recently that DAZN would be offering an "Ultimate" – their word, not mine – subscription. It would be a package that would come at the tidy cost of $44.99 per month, or $449.99 annually, which would include a "minimum" – again, their words, not mine – of 12 pay-per-view events throughout the year.

There's been an abundance of outrage on social media over this new option. Much of it centers around the fact that when it first started in 2018, DAZN claimed that for the price of your subscription, you would be getting all of their boxing content.

At that time, it included fights involving the likes of Anthony Joshua, Gennadiy Golovkin and, most notably, Canelo Alvarez (who could be considered the last true pay-per-view franchise in the game). You actually got more for less. But in recent years, not only has the price of the monthly and yearly subscription risen, pay-per-view is now a regular facet of DAZN's lineup.

Now it seems that they will have at least one pay-per-view event per month. It reminds me a bit of TVKO. You remember them, right? Long ago, they were the pay-per-view arm of HBO Sports when it was the dominant force televising boxing in the States. Later, TVKO was rebranded as HBO Pay-Per-View.

TVKO was actually meant to be a monthly series of pay-per-view fights as it began operations in April of 1991 with the heavyweight title bout between Evander Holyfield and George Foreman. They found out quickly that this just wasn't sustainable.

"It was a monthly pay-per-view show for a while," recalled Lou DiBella, who was the senior vice president of programming for HBO Sports from 1989 to 2000. "And then it became a little more sporadic, with the thought that a monthly series really wouldn't work because you're just going to the well too much.

"Asking people to pay for the same product that they were otherwise getting from you without paying is sort of foolhardy. It's bad marshaling."

Keep this in mind: In that era, HBO was the gold standard for the sport with a robust budget. Being on the network meant you had made it as a fighter, and being on one of its bigger pay-per-view shows usually meant it was a superfight. The kind that had crossover appeal.

The reality was that not every fight – no matter how good the participants – was meant to be put behind a paywall. Case in point: At the end of 1991, TVKO aired the showdown between two future Hall of Famers – James Toney and Mike McCallum – from the Convention Hall in Atlantic City, New Jersey, for Toney's IBF middleweight title. They engaged in a classic bout that ended up as a draw. For as good as that contest was, it failed to move the needle in terms of buys. By the time they rematched in the summer of 1992, it was broadcast on regular HBO.

DiBella explained: "When you were getting into the niche stuff and it turned out to be a great fight and did a rematch, we wanted the eyeballs of HBO, the mothership. We didn't want people to have to pay for it."

What some people don't understand about the utilization of pay-per-view is that it isn't just about the big fights where the boxers' purses go far beyond the license fee a network is willing to put up. It's also used to create revenue for fights that were oftentimes rejected by the network or simply did not fit into its yearly budget.

There was a time when promoters would actually produce independent pay-per-view cards on their own. Top Rank had their own "Latin Fury" and "Pinoy Power" series that kept their boxers active as they essentially

created their own dates outside of HBO or Showtime. Cedric Kushner had his "Heavyweight Explosion" franchise that was used to develop his stable of big men and put wins in them before they got called up for more lucrative assignments.

"We did the smaller pay-per-views as a cost-saving mechanism, particularly when we had a long-term fighter contract, not long-term promoter contracts, and you owed particular fights," explained DiBella. "Quite frankly, there were some fights that we didn't want to put on HBO that we put on pay-per-view for a fairly low pay-per-view price to basically recoup as much money as we could. We abandoned the concept that people would continue to buy pay-per-view out of habit, because, guess what?

"People don't continually buy pay-per-view out of habit."

When it comes to pay-per-view, success isn't just about the quality of the fight but just how familiar the names on the marquee are to the public at large. As Bob Arum once said to me about this: "You gotta have stars." Holyfield-Foreman did boffo numbers, while Toney-McCallum I was something that only the diehard fans of the sport consumed. Again, names matter.

You wonder, as we head into 2026 with Canelo in the sunset of his career, is there anyone out there who can carry the mantle as a pay-per-view franchise?

Out of curiosity, I looked up just how many major pay-per-views were distributed by HBO from 2006 to 2008, a time when the network was still a force within the sport. In both 2006 and 2007, they had nine cards on pay-per-view, and seven in 2008.

But that era had established stars like Oscar De La Hoya, Floyd Mayweather Jr., Manny Pacquiao, Miguel Cotto, Marco Antonio Barrera, Erik Morales, Roy Jones Jr., Felix Trinidad, Shane Mosley, Bernard Hopkins and Fernando Vargas. Does the current landscape have this many boxers who are even nominally known to the casual fan?

Will DAZN provide Lopez vs. Stevenson-level PPV shows each month?

The official announcement for Teofimo Lopez-Shakur Stevenson was released in early December. The grudge match is scheduled for January 31 in New York. It's safe to assume that this will be a DAZN pay-per-view. If that is the case, it's a solid start to this plan. There is also the much talked-about showdown between Jaron Ennis and Vergil Ortiz, which could take place in the spring of 2026.

The question is: Can DAZN sustain this level of quality? Are there 12 pay-per-view-worthy bouts a year in the current landscape?

"I don't think there's six," was DiBella's retort. "I'm not kidding. I don't think there's six. You see, a pay-per-view should be capable of generating enough eyeballs to be substantial, right?"

It's a fair question. Are we going to get a regular dose of Lopez-Stevenson and Ennis-Ortiz, or will more fights like Moses Itauma-Dillian Whyte and Joseph Parker-Fabio Wardley be foisted upon us and dressed up as pay-per-view cards?

For better or worse, pay-per-view is alive and here to stay.

"[DAZN] said they killed it – and became Dr. Frankenstein," quipped DiBella. "What is going on? With all due respect, that's just stupidity."

2006 HBO PPV

Jan. 21	Manny Pacquiao vs. Erik Morales II
Feb. 25	Shane Mosley vs. Fernando Vargas
April 8	Floyd Mayweather vs. Zab Judah
May 6	Oscar De La Hoya vs. Ricardo Mayorga
June 10	Antonio Tarver vs. Bernard Hopkins
July 15	Shane Mosley vs. Fernando Vargas II
Aug. 12	Hasim Rahman vs. Oleg Maskaev II
Sept. 16	Marco Antonio Barrera vs. Rocky Juarez II
Nov. 18	Manny Pacquiao vs. Erik Morales III

2007

March 17	Marco Antonio Barrera vs. Juan Manuel Marquez
May 5	Oscar De La Hoya vs. Floyd Mayweather
June 9	Miguel Cotto vs. Zab Judah
July 21	Bernard Hopkins vs. Winky Wright
Oct. 6	Manny Pacquiao vs. Marco Antonio Barrera II
Nov. 10	Miguel Cotto vs. Shane Mosley
Dec. 8	Floyd Mayweather vs. Ricky Hatton

2008

Jan. 19	Roy Jones vs. Felix Trinidad
Feb. 16	Kelly Pavlik vs. Jermain Taylor II
March 15	Manny Pacquiao vs. Juan Manuel Marquez II
June 28	Manny Pacquiao vs. David Diaz
July 26	Antonio Margarito vs. Miguel Cotto
Sept. 13	Joel Casamayor vs. Juan Manuel Marquez
Oct. 18	Kelly Pavlik vs. Bernard Hopkins
Nov. 8	Joe Calzaghe vs. Roy Jones
Dec. 6	Oscar De La Hoya vs. Manny Pacquiao

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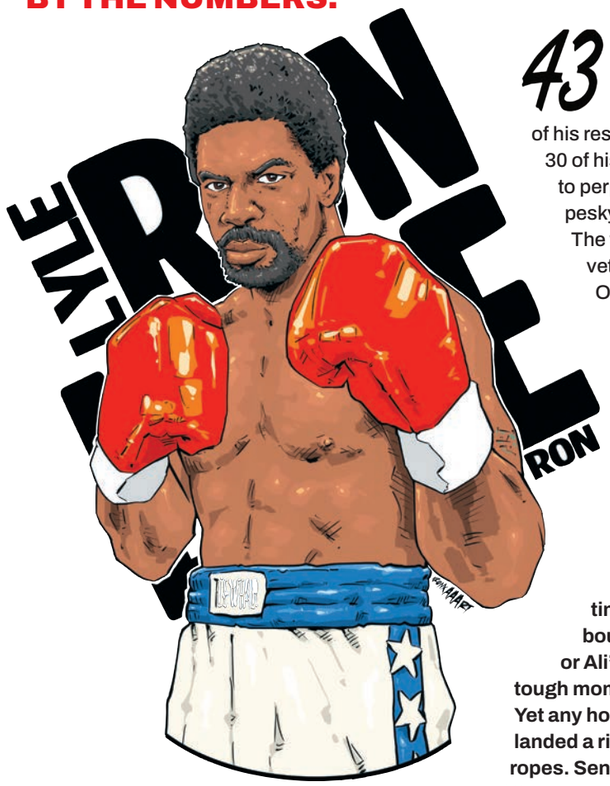


RON LYLE

by Don Stradley •
Illustration by KronkAAArt

The 1970s are rightfully considered a golden era of heavyweight boxing. Even beyond the triangle of Muhammad Ali, Joe Frazier and George Foreman, there were too many fine fighters to be crammed into a top 10, with even fringe players earning devoted followers and regular television dates. Ron Lyle was a major part of this era, and any discussion of the period would have to include him. Filled to the brim with death and violence, here's his story by the numbers.

43 victories »

Though Lyle may best be known for losing one of the most dramatic bouts of the decade to George Foreman, the rest of his resume is impressive. Starting his pro career in 1971, Lyle won 30 of his first 32 bouts, the only blemishes being a decision loss to perpetual contender Jerry Quarry and a draw with the always pesky Gregorio Peralta (whom Lyle had previously defeated). The wins were over a who's who of the time, including such veterans as "Scrap Iron" Johnson, Manuel Ramos, Jack O'Halloran and Leroy Caldwell, plus bigger names such as Buster Mathis, the rugged Oscar Bonavena and former WBA titlist Jimmy Ellis. It was a promising start for Lyle, who had spent seven and a half years in prison for second-degree murder and didn't begin his professional boxing career until he was 30. He ended his career with a record of 43-7-1 (31 knockouts).

11 rounds with Muhammad Ali »

To the surprise of the boxing world and the fans in Las Vegas, Lyle gave Ali a difficult time for the first 10 rounds of their 15-round championship bout in 1975. Not intimidated by the magnitude of the event or Ali's reputation, Lyle not only gave the champion some tough moments, but he was ahead on two of the three scorecards. Yet any hopes for an upset were dashed in the 11th when Ali landed a right hand that sent Lyle staggering backward into the ropes. Sensing the big finish, Ali fired away with approximately 40 unanswered punches until referee Ferd Hernandez stopped the bout at the 1:08 mark. Lyle's camp objected to the stoppage, but the challenger was just standing there taking blows to the head. Still, Lyle had done well in what would be his only title shot. "He's a good fighter," Ali said. "Much better than I thought he was."

6 rounds to stop Earnie Shavers »

The 1970s were so flush with high-quality heavyweights that the Lyle-Shavers battle took place with minimal fanfare. Why these two hard-punching behemoths weren't on a major network, or even the fledgling HBO, is unfathomable. Yet on Saturday, September 13, 1975, on Lyle's home turf of Denver, Colorado, the two went at each other like a couple of street fighters armed with sledgehammers. They didn't stop swinging until Shavers was counted out at 0:47 of the sixth. Mike Hayes, vice president of the Denver Boxing Club, spoke for many when he called it "one of the most amazing nights in Colorado sports history."

What made it so memorable was that the mighty Shavers bombarded Lyle in the first round and then dropped him in the second. Down for the first time in his career, a badly hurt Lyle somehow got back on his feet just as the bell sounded. Shavers' manager, Joe Gennaro, would claim Lyle was given a long count (not true), and even Shavers, known as a humble man, complained that the fight had been "stolen" from him.

Regardless of Gennaro's grousing, the fight was a masterpiece of its kind. Some of the exchanges were so brutal that if you saw these two fighting in an alley, you'd probably call the cops to break it up, lest one of them not come out alive.

1 memorable fight with George Foreman »

Lyle's reward for beating Shavers was a bout with Foreman in Las Vegas. With both fighters suffering losses to Ali and hoping for rematches with him, each wanted to win in a big way. The result was five rounds of thunderous action and multiple knockdowns, with Foreman taking a beating before coming back to stop Lyle at 2:28 of the fifth. Unlike the Lyle-Shavers bout, this one was on national TV with Howard Cosell screaming his head off. It went into the history books, and The Ring selected it as Fight of the Year.

In the immediate aftermath, though, the Foreman-Lyle fight wasn't embraced as a classic. Many writers dismissed Foreman as "slipshod," "shoddy" and "lucky" to get the win. "Have you ever seen such ineptitude," wrote the Chicago Tribune, "from heavyweights who are supposed to be ranked among the best in the world?"

Some people are just hard to please. If nothing else, Lyle should've received a certificate of merit for facing Ali, Shavers and Foreman within a span of eight months.

2 losses to Jimmy Young »

Young was a counterpunching Philadelphia heavyweight who defeated Lyle on points in 1975 and again in 1976. By the second time he'd failed against Young, the press had begun to write Lyle off as a fading trial horse. Before a scant crowd of less than 2,000 customers in San Francisco's Civic Auditorium, Lyle simply couldn't catch the lighter, quicker Young. "For aging Ron Lyle, losing may have been the last hurrah," wrote the Associated Press.

Lyle managed to defeat some good competitors in the next few years, including Joe Bugner and Scott LeDoux, but he was clearly on the way out.

4 fights at age 54 »

Lyle left boxing in 1980 after an embarrassing one-round KO loss to Gerry Cooney. But when Foreman regained the heavyweight title at age 45, Lyle embarked on his own comeback, minus Foreman's circus-like atmosphere.

In a venue known as Peel's Palace in Erlanger, Kentucky, a club known for hosting punk rock concerts and pro wrestling, Lyle spent April, May and June of 1995 dusting off a trio of unspectacular opponents, their combined record being 13-52-2. One of them, Ed Strickland, was 0-20 at the time. In August, Lyle's final fight brought him back home to Colorado, where he faced Dave Slaughter at the Regency Hotel in Denver. Slaughter, a 37-year-old whose record was 5-17-1, quit after two rounds.

"Fans cheered as Lyle blew kisses," reported the Scripps Howard News Service. "For a moment it was like it used to be – except that he's 54."

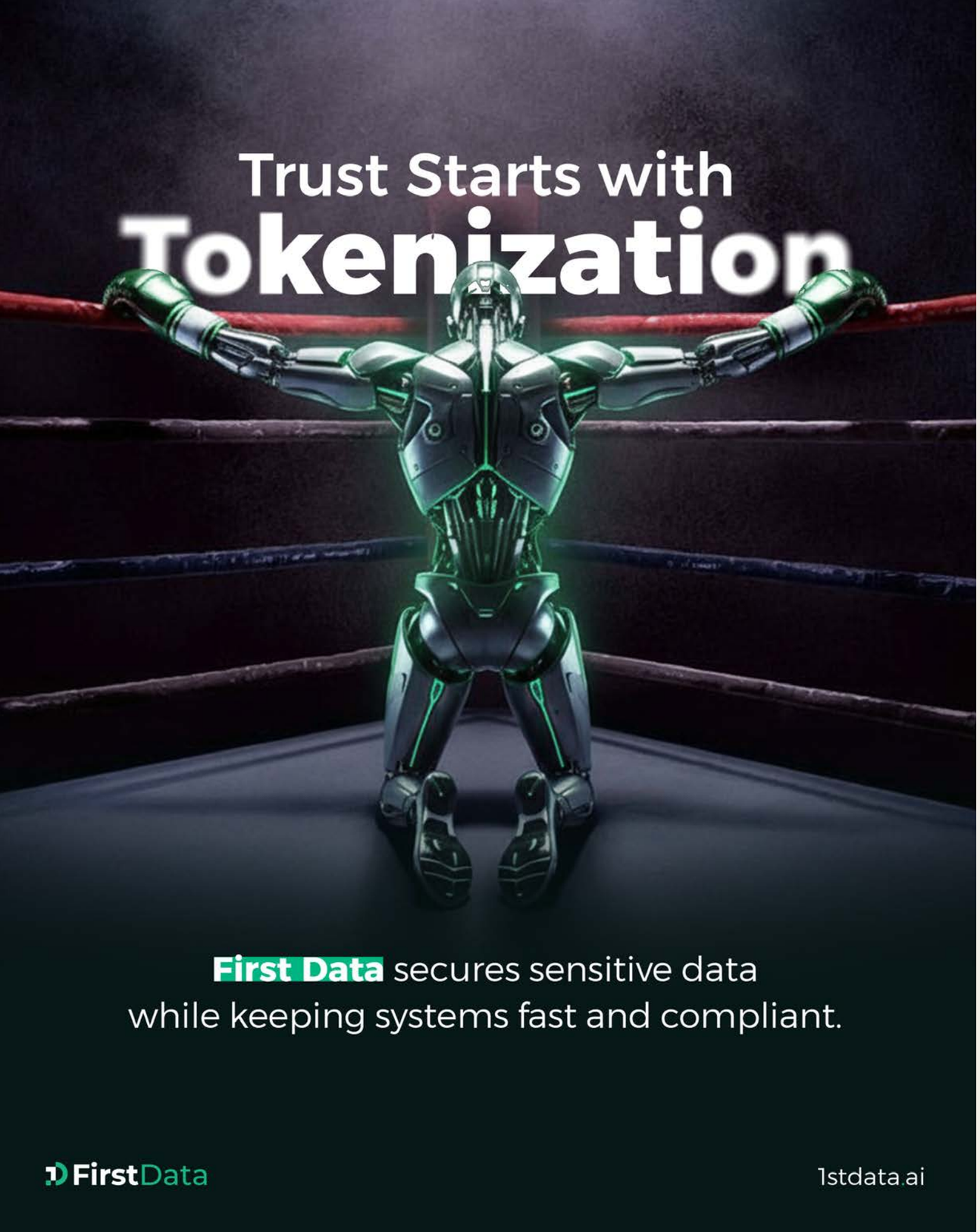
Lyle talked about fighting Foreman or maybe Larry Holmes in a special old-timer match, but such bouts never materialized.

70 years old when he died »

Lyle (1941-2011) spent his later years working odd jobs and training fighters in Las Vegas. He remained one of boxing's great "What if?" stories, as in, "What if he hadn't spent so much time in prison and had turned pro at 20 instead of 30?" It was an interesting thought, but it was the Colorado State Penitentiary in Canon City that made Lyle into a boxer. While serving his sentence – he allegedly shot a rival gang member – he fought on the prison boxing team and then, once paroled, had a brief amateur career. Lyle's background became an easy hook for publicity, particularly an episode where he nearly died after being stabbed by a fellow inmate.

Though Lyle appeared to be a thoughtful, soft-spoken man outside the ring, there were problems in his private life that were often violent in nature. Shortly before his bout with Ali, Lyle was in court for shooting at his wife, Nadine. On New Year's Eve 1977, he shot and killed a man in his home. Lyle was acquitted, his attorney arguing that he'd acted in self-defense. Yet Lyle certainly seemed quick-tempered and not afraid to use a gun. "All my life has been hard," he once said, "and I've had no one but myself to blame."

Lyle may not have been an all-time great, but in a decade overflowing with superb heavyweights, he made an indelible imprint. If we're left to wonder, "What if?," it's only because what we got was so damned exciting. RING



Ring Ratings Through fights of December 13, 2025

Devin Haney looked every bit the superior fighter in his victory over Brian Norman Jr.

Richard Pelham

Recent Fight Results

MEN

200: Jai Opetaia (C) KO 8 Huseyin Cinkara
200: Yamil Peralta (No. 7) removed for inactivity
200: Noel Mikaelian (No. 6, ▲2) UD 12 Badou Jack (No. 5, ▼1)
175: David Benavidez (No. 2) TKO 7 Anthony Yarde (No. 4, ▼1)
160: Erislandy Lara (in at No. 4) UD 12 Johan Gonzalez
160: Zhanibek Alimkhanuly (No. 1) removed for positive PED test
147: Devin Haney (in at No. 1) UD 12 Brian Norman Jr. (No. 1, ▼1)
154: Jesus Ramos (No. 8) moved up in weight
135: Abdullah Mason (No. 9, ▲3) UD 12 Sam Noakes (No. 8, ▼1)
130: O'Shaquie Foster (No. 1) UD 12 Stephen Fulton (No. 4 at 126)
130: Lamont Roach (No. 4) moved up in weight
126: Ra'eese Aleem (in at No. 10) UD 12 Mikito Nakano
126: Robeisy Ramirez (No. 9) removed for inactivity
118: Takuma Inoue (No. 4, ▲1) UD 12 Tenshin Nasukawa (No. 8, ▼2)
118: Riku Masuda (in at No. 8) TD 5 Jose Miguel Calderon
118: Jose Salas (in at No. 7) TKO 7 Landile Ngxeke
115: Jesse Rodriguez (C) KO 10 Fernando Martinez (No. 1)
115: Tomoya Tsuboi (in at No. 5) TKO 8 Carlos Cuadras (No. 3, retired)
105: Knockout CP Freshmart (No. 3) moved up in weight

WOMEN

168: Vanessa Lepage-Joanisse (in at No. 5) UD 8 Sonya Dreiling
147: Stephanie Aquino (No. 4, ▲1) UD 10 Anahi Sanchez
135: Elif Nur Turhan (in at No. 2) TKO 5 Beatriz Ferreira (No. 2, ▼2)
126: Skye Nicolson (No. 3, ▲2) UD 10 Yulihan Avila
115: Jasmine Artiga (in at No. 5) UD 10 Stephanie Silva
105: Sol Baumstarh (in at No. 5) UD 10 Jazmin Villarino

MEN'S RING RATINGS Through Dec. 13, 2025

CHAMPIONSHIP BELTS: ◆ RING ◆ IBF ◆ WBA ◆ WBC ◆ WBO | ★ NEW TO RATINGS

HEAVYWEIGHTS
WEIGHT UNLIMITED

C **OLEKSANDR USYK** ◆◆◆◆
Ukraine • 24-0-0 (15 KOs)

1 **TYSON FURY**
U.K. • 34-2-1 (24 KOs)

2 **FABIO WARDLEY** ◆
U.K. • 20-0-1 (19 KOs)

3 **AGIT KABAYEL**
Germany • 26-0-0 (18 KOs)

4 **JOSEPH PARKER**
New Zealand • 36-4-0 (24 KOs)

5 **DANIEL DUBOIS**
U.K. • 22-3-0 (21 KOs)

6 **FILIP HRGOVIC**
Croatia • 19-1-0 (14 KOs)

7 **ZHILEI ZHANG**
China • 27-3-1 (22 KOs)

8 **MARTIN BAKOLE**
Congo • 21-2-1 (16 KOs)

9 **MOSES ITAUMA**
U.K. • 13-0-0 (11 KOs)

10 **EFE AJAGBA**
Nigeria • 20-1-1 (14 KOs)

CRUISERWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 200 POUNDS

C **JAI OPETAIA** ◆◆
Australia • 29-0-0 (23 KOs)

1 **GILBERTO RAMIREZ** ◆◆
Mexico • 48-1-0 (30 KOs)

2 **CHRIS BILLAM-SMITH**
U.K. • 21-2-0 (13 KOs)

3 **MICHAL CIESLAK**
Poland • 28-2-0 (22 KOs)

4 ▲+2 **NOEL MIKAELIAN** ◆
Armenia • 28-3-0 (12 KOs)

5 ▼-1 **RYAN ROZICKI**
Canada • 20-1-1 (19 KOs)

6 ▼-1 **BADOU JACK**
Sweden • 29-4-3 (17 KOs)

7 ▲+1 **LEONARDO MOSQUEA**
France • 17-0-0 (10 KOs)

8 ▲+1 **ROBIN SIRWAN SAFAR**
Sweden • 19-0-0 (13 KOs)

9 ▲+1 **VIDDAL RILEY**
U.K. • 13-0-0 (7 KOs)

10 ★ **BRANDON GLANTON**
U.S. • 21-3-0 (18 KOs)

LIGHT HEAVYWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 175 POUNDS

C **DMITRY BIVOL** ◆◆◆◆
Russia • 24-1-0 (12 KOs)

1 **ARTUR BETERBIEV**
Russia • 21-1-0 (20 KOs)

2 **DAVID BENAVIDEZ** ◆
U.S. • 31-0-0 (25 KOs)

3 **CALLUM SMITH**
U.K. • 31-2-0 (22 KOs)

4 ▲+1 **ALBERT RAMIREZ**
Venezuela • 22-0-0 (19 KOs)

5 ▼-1 **ANTHONY YARDE**
U.K. • 27-4-0 (24 KOs)

6 **DAVID MORRELL**
Cuba • 12-1-0 (9 KOs)

7 **IMAM KHATAEV**
Australia • 11-1-0 (10 KOs)

8 **JOSHUA BUATSI**
U.K. • 20-1-0 (13 KOs)

9 **OLEKSANDR GVOZDYK**
Ukraine • 21-2-0 (17 KOs)

10 **WILLY HUTCHINSON**
U.K. • 19-2-0 (14 KOs)

SUPER MIDDLEWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 168 POUNDS

C **TERENCE CRAWFORD** ◆◆◆◆
U.S. • 42-0-0 (31 KOs)

1 **CANELO ALVAREZ**
Mexico • 63-3-2 (39 KOs)

2 **OSLEYS IGLESIAS**
Cuba • 14-0-0 (13 KOs)

3 **CHRISTIAN MBILLI**
France • 29-0-1 (24 KOs)

4 **LESTER MARTINEZ**
Guatemala • 19-0-1 (16 KOs)

5 **DIEGO PACHECO**
U.S. • 25-0-0 (18 KOs)

6 **JOSE ARMANDO RESENDIZ**
Mexico • 16-2-0 (11 KOs)

7 **CALEB PLANT**
U.S. • 23-3-0 (14 KOs)

8 **HAMZAH SHEERAZ**
U.K. • 22-0-1 (18 KOs)

9 **BRUNO SURACE**
France • 26-1-2 (5 KOs)

10 **WILLIAM SCULL**
Cuba • 23-1-0 (9 KOs)

MIDDLEWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 160 POUNDS

C **(VACANT)**

1 **CARLOS ADAMES** ◆
Dom. Rep. • 24-1-1 (18 KOs)

2 ▲+1 **YOENLI HERNANDEZ**
Cuba • 9-0-0 (8 KOs)

3 ★ **ERISLANDY LARA** ◆
U.S. • 32-3-3 (19 KOs)

4 **CONOR BENN**
U.K. • 24-1-0 (14 KOs)

5 **TROY ISLEY**
U.S. • 15-0-0 (5 KOs)

6 **ETINOSA OLIHA**
Italy • 22-0-0 (10 KOs)

7 **AARON MCKENNA**
Ireland • 20-0-0 (10 KOs)

8 **AUSTIN WILLIAMS**
U.S. • 19-1-0 (13 KOs)

9 **CHRIS EUBANK JR.**
U.K. • 35-4-0 (25 KOs)

10 ★ **JESUS RAMOS JR.**
U.S. • 24-1-0 (19 KOs)

JR. MIDDLEWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 154 POUNDS

C **(VACANT)**

1 **VERGIL ORTIZ**
U.S. • 24-0-0 (22 KOs)

2 **SEBASTIAN FUNDORA** ◆
U.S. • 23-1-1 (15 KOs)

3 **ISRAIL MADRIMOV**
Uzbekistan • 10-2-1 (7 KOs)

4 **BAKHRAM MURTAZALIEV** ◆
Russia • 23-0-0 (17 KOs)

5 **XANDER ZAYAS** ◆
Puerto Rico • 22-0-0 (13 KOs)

6 **JARON ENNIS**
U.S. • 35-0-0 (31 KOs)

7 **BRANDON ADAMS**
U.S. • 26-4-0 (16 KOs)

8 ▲+1 **ABASS BARAOU** ◆
Germany • 17-1-0 (9 KOs)

9 ▲+1 **SERHII BOHACHUK**
Ukraine • 26-3-0 (24 KOs)

10 ★ **BAKARY SAMAKE**
France • 19-0-0 (11 KOs)

WELTERWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 147 POUNDS

C **(VACANT)**

1 ★ **DEVIN HANEY** ◆
U.S. • 33-0-0 (15 KOs)

2 ▼-1 **BRIAN NORMAN JR.**
U.S. • 28-1-0 (22 KOs)

3 ▼-1 **EIMANTAS STANIONIS**
Lithuania • 16-1-0 (9 KOs)

4 ▼-1 **GIOVANI SANTILLAN**
U.S. • 34-1-0 (18 KOs)

5 ▼-1 **ROHAN POLANCO**
Dom. Rep. • 17-0-0 (10 KOs)

6 ▼-1 **SHAKHRAM GIYASOV**
Uzbekistan • 18-0-0 (11 KOs)

7 ▼-1 **ALEXIS ROCHA**
U.S. • 25-2-1 (16 KOs)

8 ▼-1 **RAUL CURIEL**
Mexico • 16-0-1 (14 KOs)

9 ▼-1 **JACK CATTERALL**
U.K. • 32-2-0 (14 KOs)

10 ▼-1 **MARIO BARRIOS** ◆
U.S. • 29-2-2 (18 KOs)

JR. WELTERWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 140 POUNDS

C **TEOFIMO LOPEZ** ◆◆
U.S. • 22-1-0 (13 KOs)

1 **RICHARDSON HITCHINS** ◆
U.S. • 20-0-0 (8 KOs)

2 **SUBRIEL MATIAS** ◆
Puerto Rico • 23-2-0 (22 KOs)

3 **ALBERTO PUELLO**
Dom. Rep. • 24-1-0 (10 KOs)

4 **ARNOLD BARBOZA**
U.S. • 32-1-0 (11 KOs)

5 **GARY ANTUANNE RUSSELL** ◆
U.S. • 18-1-0 (17 KOs)

6 **SANDOR MARTIN**
Spain • 42-4-0 (15 KOs)

7 **DALTON SMITH**
U.K. • 18-0-0 (13 KOs)

8 **ADAM AZIM**
U.K. • 14-0-0 (11 KOs)

9 **LINDOLFO DELGADO**
Mexico • 24-0-0 (16 KOs)

10 **ANDY HIRAOKA**
Japan • 24-0-0 (19 KOs)

MEN'S RING RATINGS Through Dec. 13, 2025

CHAMPIONSHIP BELTS: ◆ RING ◆ IBF ◆ WBA ◆ WBC ◆ WBO | ★ NEW TO RATINGS

LIGHTWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 135 POUNDS

C (VACANT)

1 SHAKUR STEVENSON ◆
U.S. • 24-0-0 (11 KOs)

2 GERVONTA DAVIS ◆
U.S. • 30-0-1 (28 KOs)

3 RAYMOND MURATALLA ◆
U.S. • 23-0-0 (17 KOs)

4 WILLIAM ZEPEDA
Mexico • 33-1-0 (27 KOs)

5 ANDY CRUZ
Cuba • 6-0-0 (3 KOs)

6 ▲+3 **ABDULLAH MASON**
U.S. • 20-0-0 (17 KOs)

7 ▼-1 **FLOYD SCHOFIELD**
U.S. • 19-0-0 (13 KOs)

8 ▼-1 **DENYS BERINCHYK**
Ukraine • 19-1-0 (9 KOs)

9 ▼-1 **SAM NOAKES**
U.K. • 17-1-0 (15 KOs)

10 LUCAS BAHDI
Canada • 20-0-0 (15 KOs)

JR. LIGHTWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 130 POUNDS

C (VACANT)

1 O'SHAQUIE FOSTER ◆
U.S. • 24-3-0 (12 KOs)

2 EMANUEL NAVARRETE ◆
Mexico • 39-2-1 (32 KOs)

3 ANTHONY CACACE
Ireland • 24-1-0 (9 KOs)

4 ▲+1 **EDUARDO NUNEZ** ◆
Mexico • 29-1-0 (27 KOs)

5 ▲+1 **ROBSON CONCEICAO**
Brazil • 20-3-1 (10 KOs)

6 ▲+1 **EDUARDO HERNANDEZ**
Mexico • 37-2-0 (32 KOs)

7 ▲+1 **CHARLY SUAREZ**
Philippines • 18-0-0 (10 KOs)

8 ▲+1 **RAYMOND FORD**
U.S. • 18-1-1 (8 KOs)

9 ▲+1 **JAMES DICKENS**
U.K. • 36-5-0 (15 KOs)

10 ★ **RYAN GARNER**
U.K. • 18-0-0 (9 KOs)

FEATHERWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 126 POUNDS

C (VACANT)

1 RAFAEL ESPINOZA ◆
Mexico • 28-0-0 (24 KOs)

2 ANGELO LEO ◆
U.S. • 26-1-0 (12 KOs)

3 NICK BALL ◆
U.K. • 23-0-1 (13 KOs)

4 STEPHEN FULTON
U.S. • 23-2-0 (8 KOs)

5 LUIS ALBERTO LOPEZ
Mexico • 31-3-0 (18 KOs)

6 BRUCE CARRINGTON
U.S. • 16-0-0 (9 KOs)

7 BRANDON FIGUEROA
U.S. • 26-2-1 (19 KOs)

8 MIRCO CUELLO
Argentina • 16-0-0 (13 KOs)

9 ★ **RA'EESE ALEEM**
U.S. • 23-1-0 (12 KOs)

10 ★ **DAYAN GONZALEZ**
Cuba • 18-0-0 (16 KOs)

JR. FEATHERWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 122 POUNDS

C NAOYA INOUE ◆◆◆◆◆
Japan • 31-0-0 (27 KOs)

1 MARLON TAPALES
Philippines • 41-4-0 (22 KOs)

2 MURODJON AKHMADALIEV
Uzbekistan • 14-2-0 (11 KOs)

3 SAM GOODMAN
Australia • 20-1-0 (8 KOs)

4 ALAN PICASSO
Mexico • 32-0-1 (17 KOs)

5 SHABAZ MASOUD
U.K. • 15-0-0 (4 KOs)

6 TJ DOHENY
Ireland • 26-6-0 (20 KOs)

7 RAMON CARDENAS
U.S. • 26-2-0 (14 KOs)

8 SEBASTIAN HERNANDEZ
Mexico • 20-0-0 (18 KOs)

9 SUBARU MURATA
Japan • 10-0-0 (10 KOs)

10 BRYAN MERCADO
Mexico • 32-1-0 (26 KOs)

BANTAMWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 118 POUNDS

C (VACANT)

1 SEIYA TSUTSUMI
Japan • 12-0-3 (8 KOs)

2 CHRISTIAN MEDINA ◆
Mexico • 26-4-0 (19 KOs)

3 ▲+1 **TAKUMA INOUE**
Japan • 21-2-0 (5 KOs)

4 ▼-1 **RYOSUKE NISHIDA**
Japan • 10-1-0 (2 KOs)

5 DAIGO HIGA
Japan • 21-3-3 (19 KOs)

6 ANTONIO VARGAS ◆
U.S. • 19-1-1 (11 KOs)

7 ★ **JOSE SALAS** ◆
Mexico • 17-0-0 (11 KOs)

8 ▼-1 **YOSHIKI TAKEI**
Japan • 11-1-0 (9 KOs)

9 ★ **RIKU MASUDA**
Japan • 9-1-0 (8 KOs)

10 ▼-2 **TENSHIN NASUKAWA**
Japan • 7-1-0 (2 KOs)

JR. BANTAMWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 115 POUNDS

C JESSE RODRIGUEZ ◆◆◆◆
U.S. • 23-0-0 (16 KOs)

1 FERNANDO MARTINEZ
Argentina • 18-1-0 (9 KOs)

2 KAZUTO IOKA
Japan • 31-4-1 (16 KOs)

3 ▲+1 **DAVID JIMENEZ**
Costa Rica • 18-1-0 (12 KOs)

4 ▲+1 **PHUMELELA CAFU**
S. Africa • 11-1-3 (8 KOs)

5 ★ **TOMOYA TSUBOI**
Japan • 3-0-0 (2 KOs)

6 ANDREW MOLONEY
Australia • 28-4-0 (18 KOs)

7 RICARDO MALAJIKA
S. Africa • 17-2-0 (12 KOs)

8 WILLIBALDO GARCIA ◆
Mexico • 23-6-2 (13 KOs)

9 RENE CALIXTO BIBIANO
Mexico • 24-1-1 (10 KOs)

10 JAYR RAQUINEL
Philippines • 18-2-1 (14 KOs)

FLYWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 112 POUNDS

C (VACANT)

1 RICARDO SANDOVAL ◆◆
U.S. • 27-2-0 (18 KOs)

2 KENSHIRO TERAJI
Japan • 25-2-0 (16 KOs)

3 SEIGO YURI AKUI
Japan • 21-3-1 (11 KOs)

4 MASAMICHI YABUKI ◆
Japan • 18-4-0 (17 KOs)

5 GALAL YAFAI
U.K. • 9-1-0 (7 KOs)

6 ANTHONY OLASCUAGA ◆
U.S. • 10-1-0 (7 KOs)

7 ANGEL AYALA
Mexico • 18-1-0 (8 KOs)

8 FELIX ALVARADO
Nicaragua • 42-4-0 (35 KOs)

9 TOBIAS REYES
Argentina • 18-1-1 (16 KOs)

10 JUKIYA IIMURA
Japan • 9-1-0 (2 KOs)

JR. FLYWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 108 POUNDS

C (VACANT)

1 CARLOS CANIZALES ◆
Venezuela • 28-3-1 (20 KOs)

2 KYOSUKE TAKAMI ◆
Japan • 10-0-0 (8 KOs)

3 RENE SANTIAGO ◆
Puerto Rico • 14-4-0 (9 KOs)

4 THANONGSAK SIMSRI ◆
Thailand • 39-1-0 (34 KOs)

5 SHOKICHI IWATA
Japan • 15-2-0 (2 KOs)

6 REGIE SUGANOB
Philippines • 17-1-0 (6 KOs)

7 CRISTIAN ARANETA
Philippines • 25-3-0 (20 KOs)

8 ERIK BADILLO
Mexico • 19-0-0 (8 KOs)

9 MASATAKA TANIGUCHI
Japan • 21-5-0 (15 KOs)

10 SIVENATHI NONTSHINGA
S. Africa • 14-2-0 (11 KOs)

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MEN'S RING RATINGS

Through Dec. 13, 2025 CHAMPIONSHIP BELTS: ◆ RING ◆ IBF ◆ WBA ◆ WBC ◆ WBO | ★ NEW TO RATINGS

STRAWWEIGHTS

WEIGHT LIMIT: 105 POUNDS

C **OSCAR COLLAZO** ◆◆◆
U.S. • 13-0-0 (10 KOs)

1 **MELVIN JERUSALEM** ◆
Philippines • 25-3-0 (12 KOs)

2 **PEDRO TADURAN** ◆
Philippines • 19-4-1 (13 KOs)

3 ▲+1 **RYUSEI MATSUMOTO**
Japan • 7-0-0 (4 KOs)

4 ▲+1 **SIYAKHOLWA KUSE**
S. Africa • 9-3-1 (4 KOs)

5 ▲+1 **JOEY CANOY**
Philippines • 24-5-2 (15 KOs)

6 ▲+1 **TAKESHI ISHII**
Japan • 11-1-0 (8 KOs)

7 ▲+1 **YUNI TAKADA**
Japan • 16-9-3 (6 KOs)

8 ▲+1 **VIC SALUDAR**
Philippines • 27-6-0 (17 KOs)

9 ▲+1 **BEAVEN SIBANDA**
Zimbabwe • 9-1-0 (3 KOs)

10 ★ **JOSEPH SUMABONG**
Philippines • 9-1-0 (4 KOs)

HOW OUR RATINGS ARE COMPILED

RECORDS PROVIDED BY BOXREC.COM

Championship vacancies can be filled in the following two ways: 1. The Ring's Nos. 1 and 2 contenders fight one another. 2. If the Nos. 1 and 2 contenders choose not to fight one another and No. 1 fights No. 3, that matchup could be for the Ring title if the Editorial Board deems No. 3 worthy.

A champion can lose their belt in six situations: 1. The Champion loses a fight in the weight class in which they are champion; 2. The Champion moves to another weight class; 3. The Champion does not schedule a fight in any weight class for 18 months, although injuries and certain other unforeseen circumstances could be taken into consideration; 4. The Champion does not schedule a fight at their championship weight for 18 months (even if they fight at another weight); 5. The Champion does not schedule a fight with a Top-5 contender from any weight class for two years; 6. The Champion retires.

The Ring Editorial Board considers input from the Ratings Panel of boxing journalists from around the world and then decides collectively what changes will be made. That applies to both the pound-for-pound and divisional ratings.

POUND FOR POUND LIST

MEN

1 **TERENCE CRAWFORD**
U.S. • 42-0-0 (31 KOs)

2 **OLEKSANDR USYK**
Ukraine • 24-0-0 (15 KOs)

3 **NAOYA INOUE**
Japan • 31-0-0 (27 KOs)

4 **JESSE RODRIGUEZ**
U.S. • 23-0-0 (16 KOs)

5 **DMITRY BIVOL**
Russia • 24-1-0 (12 KOs)

6 **ARTUR BETERBIEV**
Russia • 21-1-0 (20 KOs)

7 **JUNTO NAKATANI**
Japan • 31-0-0 (24 KOs)

8 **SHAKUR STEVENSON**
U.S. • 24-0-0 (11 KOs)

9 **DAVID BENAVIDEZ**
U.S. • 31-0-0 (25 KOs)

10 **DEVIN HANEY**
U.S. • 33-0-0 (15 KOs)

"Bam" Rodriguez strode into the top 5 with his win over Fernando Martinez.

WOMEN

1 **KATIE TAYLOR**
Ireland • 25-1-0 (6 KOs)

2 **CLARESSA SHIELDS**
U.S. • 17-0-0 (3 KOs)

3 **MIKAELA MAYER**
U.S. • 22-2-0 (5 KOs)

4 **CHANTELLE CAMERON**
U.K. • 21-1-0 (8 KOs)

5 **AMANDA SERRANO**
Puerto Rico • 47-4-1 (31 KOs)

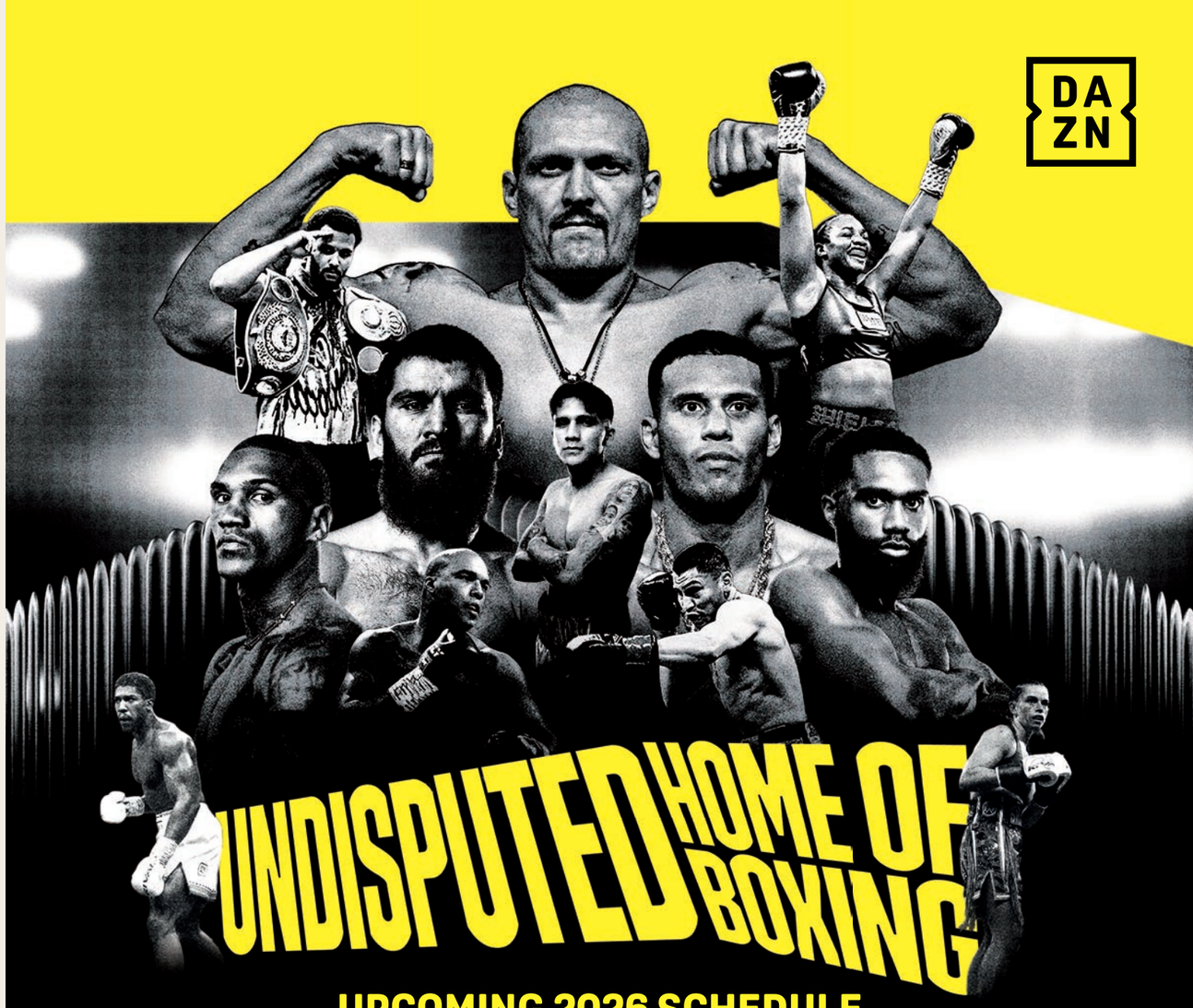
6 **GABRIELA FUNDORA**
U.S. • 17-0-0 (9 KOs)

7 **DINA THORSLUND**
Denmark • 23-0-0 (9 KOs)

8 **LAUREN PRICE**
U.K. • 9-0-0 (2 KOs)

9 **YOKASTA VALLE**
Costa Rica • 33-3-0 (10 KOs)

10 **ELLIE SCOTNEY**
U.K. • 11-0-0 (0 KOs)



UPCOMING 2026 SCHEDULE

Rocha vs. Curiel 2 January 16	Itauma vs. Franklin January 24	Muratalla vs. Cruz January 24	PPV Ring 6: Lopez vs. Stevenson January 31
Murtazaliev vs. Kelly January 31	Wood vs. Warrington 2 February 21	Shields vs. Crews-Dezurn 2 February 22	Nunez vs. Navarette February 28

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WOMEN'S RING RATINGS Through Dec. 13, 2025

CHAMPIONSHIP BELTS: ◆ RING ◆ IBF ◆ WBA ◆ WBC ◆ WBO | ★ NEW TO RATINGS

SUPER MIDDLEWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 168 POUNDS

C SHADASIA GREEN ◆◆◆
U.S. • 16-1-0 (11 KOs)
1 FRANCHON CREWS-DEZURN ◆◆
U.S. • 10-2-0 (2 KOs)
2 SAVANNAH MARSHALL
U.K. • 13-2-0 (10 KOs)
3 LANI DANIELS
New Zealand • 11-3-2 (1 KO)
4 MARY CASAMASSA
U.S. • 6-1-0 (1 KO)
5 ★ VANESSA LEPAGE-JOANISSE
Canada • 8-2-0 (2 KOs)

MIDDLEWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 160 POUNDS

C (VACANT)
1 DESLEY ROBINSON ◆◆
Australia • 11-3-0 (3 KOs)
2 MELINDA WATPOOL
Canada • 7-1-0 (2 KOs)
3 TAMM THIBEAULT
Canada • 4-0-0 (3 KOs)
4 MAPULE NGUBANE
S. Africa • 14-9-3 (3 KOs)
5 ADRIANA DOS SANTOS ARAUJO
Brazil • 6-3-0 (1 KO)

JR. MIDDLEWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 154 POUNDS

C. (VACANT)
1 MIKAELA MAYER ◆◆◆
U.S. • 22-2-0 (5 KOs)
2 OSHAE JONES ◆
U.S. • 9-0-0 (3 KOs)
3 FEMKE HERMANS
Belgium • 18-5-0 (7 KOs)
4 MARY SPENCER
Canada • 10-3-0 (6 KOs)
5 PRISCILLA PETERLE
France • 11-0-0 (3 KOs)

WELTERWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 147 POUNDS

C LAUREN PRICE ◆◆◆◆
U.K. • 9-0-0 (2 KO)
1 MIKAELA MAYER ◆
U.S. • 22-2-0 (5 KOs)
2 SANDY RYAN
U.K. • 8-3-1 (3 KOs)
3 ▲+1 STEPHANIE AQUINO
Puerto Rico • 10-0-0 (3 KOs)
4 ▼-1 NATASHA JONAS
U.K. • 16-3-1 (9 KOs)
5 MICHAELA KOTASKOVA
Czech Rep. • 11-0-2 (4 KOs)

JR. WELTERWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 140 POUNDS

C KATIE TAYLOR ◆◆◆◆
Ireland • 25-1-0 (6 KOs)
1 CHANTELLE CAMERON ◆
U.K. • 21-1-0 (8 KOs)
2 AMANDA SERRANO
Puerto Rico • 47-4-1 (31 KOs)
3 SAMANTHA WORTHINGTON
U.S. • 12-0-0 (7 KOs)
4 FLORA PILI
France • 11-0-0 (2 KOs)
5 ELIZABETH OSHOBA
Nigeria • 9-0-0 (5 KOs)

LIGHTWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 135 POUNDS

C. (VACANT)
1 CAROLINE DUBOIS ◆
U.K. • 11-0-1 (5 KOs)
2 ★ ELIF NUR TURHAN ◆
Turkiye • 12-0-0 (8 KOs)
3 TERRI HARPER ◆
U.K. • 16-2-2 (6 KOs)
4 ▼-2 BEATRIZ FERREIRA
Brazil • 8-1-0 (2 KOs)
5 HOLLY HOLM
U.S. • 34-2-3 (9 KOs)

JR. LIGHTWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 130 POUNDS

C ALYCIA BAUMGARDNER ◆◆◆◆
U.S. • 16-1-0 (7 KOs)
1 LEILA BEAUDOIN
Canada • 13-1-0 (2 KOs)
2 DELFINE PERSOON
Belgium • 50-3-0 (20 KOs)
3 JENNIFER MIRANDA
Spain • 12-1-0 (1 KO)
4 MEA MOTU
New Zealand • 23-1-0 (10 KOs)
5 ELIF NUR TURHAN
Turkiye • 12-0-0 (8 KOs)

FEATHERWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 126 POUNDS

C AMANDA SERRANO ◆◆◆
Puerto Rico • 47-4-1 (31 KOs)
1 ▲+2 SKYE NICOLSON
Australia • 15-1-0 (3 KOs)
2 ▼-1 TIARA BROWN ◆
U.S. • 20-0-0 (11 KOs)
3 ▼-1 NINA MEINKE ◆
German • 20-3-0 (4 KOs)
4 SARAH MAHFOUD
Denmark • 15-2-0 (3 KOs)
5 DANIELA BERMUDEZ
Argentina • 32-6-3 (12 KOs)

JR. FEATHERWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 122 POUNDS

C ELLIE SCOTNEY ◆◆◆◆
U.K. • 11-0-0 (0 KOs)
1 YAMILETH MERCADO
Mexico • 24-4-0 (5 KOs)
2 SEGOLENE LEFEBVRE
France • 19-1-0 (1 KO)
3 MAYELLI FLORES ROSQUERO ◆
Mexico • 13-1-1 (4 KOs)
4 ERIKA CRUZ-HERNANDEZ
Mexico • 18-2-1 (4 KOs)
5 NAZARENA ROMERO
Argentina • 14-1-2 (8 KOs)

BANTAMWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 118 POUNDS

C DINA THORSLUND ◆
Denmark • 23-0-0 (9 KOs)
1 CHERNEKA JOHNSON ◆◆◆◆
Australia • 18-2-0 (8 KOs)
2 DIANA LAURA FERNANDEZ
Mexico • 35-4-1 (5 KOs)
3 SHURRETTA METCALF
U.S. • 14-5-1 (2 KOs)
4 FLORENCIA JUAREZ
Argentina • 13-1-0 (1 KO)
5 ★ JOHANNA WONYOU
France • 12-0-0 (2 KOs)

JR. BANTAMWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 115 POUNDS

C MIZUKI HIRUTA ◆◆
Japan • 10-0-0 (2 KOs)
1 GINNY FUCHS
U.S. • 4-0-0 (1 KO)
2 ADELAIDA RUIZ
U.S. • 17-1-1 (8 KOs)
3 ▲+1 CARLA MERINO
Argentina • 16-3-0 (4 KOs)
4 ▲+1 EMMA DOLAN
U.K. • 8-0-0 (1 KO)
5 ★ JASMINE ARTIGA
U.S. • 15-0-1 (7 KOs)

FLYWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 112 POUNDS

C GABRIELA FUNDORA ◆◆◆◆◆
U.S. • 17-0-0 (9 KOs)
1 KENIA ENRIQUEZ
Mexico • 28-1-0 (11 KOs)
2 ARELY MUCINO
Mexico • 32-5-2 (11 KOs)
3 JASMINA ZAPOTOCZNA
U.K. • 10-1-0 (0 KOs)
4 MARILYN BADILLO AMAYA
Mexico • 19-1-1 (3 KOs)
5 ★ DIANA LAURA FERNANDEZ
Mexico • 36-4-1 (5 KOs)

JR. FLYWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 108 POUNDS

C (VACANT)
1 EVELIN BERMUDEZ ◆◆◆
Argentina • 22-1-1 (8 KOs)
2 LOURDES JUAREZ ◆
Mexico • 39-4-0 (5 KOs)
3 GABRIELA ALANIZ
Argentina • 17-2-0 (7 KOS)
4 ▲+1 SARA BAILEY
Canada • 6-1-0 (0 KOs)
5 ▼-1 YESICA NERY PLATA
Mexico • 30-3-0 (3 KOs)

STRAWWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 105 POUNDS

C (VACANT)
1 YOKASTA VALLE ◆
Costa Rica • 33-3-0 (10 KOs)
2 SARAH BORMANN ◆
Germany • 21-1-0 (7 KOs)
3 YUKO KUROKI ◆
Japan • 25-9-2 (10 KOs)
4 KIM CLAVEL ◆
Canada • 22-2-0 (3 KOs)
5 ★ SOL BAUMSTARH
Argentina • 14-7-1 (8 KOs)

ATOMWEIGHTS
WEIGHT LIMIT: 102 POUNDS

C (VACANT)
1 SUMIRE YAMANAKA
Japan • 9-1-0 (3 KOs)
2 CAMILA ZAMORANO
Mexico • 12-0-0 (1 KO)
3 ERI MATSUDA
Japan • 8-2-1 (1 KO)
4 ESNEIDY RODRIGUEZ OLMOS
Mexico • 11-0-1 (1 KO)
5 NAO UGAWA
Japan • 6-0-0 (0 KOs)

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SUPERFIGHT SHUFFLE

AFTER **JUNTO NAKATANI'S** TOUGHER THAN EXPECTED NIGHT IN RIYADH TOOK SOME OF THE LUSTER OFF AN ANTICIPATED MATCHUP WITH SUPERSTAR **NAOYA INOUE,** ATTENTION HAS SHIFTED TO A POTENTIAL CLASH BETWEEN "THE MONSTER" AND **JESSE "BAM" RODRIGUEZ**

By Tom Gray

Nakatani was pushed to the limit by Sebastian Hernandez.

During my flight back from Riyadh, where I'd covered the "Ring V: Night of the Samurai" card featuring Japanese powerhouses Naoya Inoue and Junto Nakatani in separate bouts, I reminisced about the first time I attended a world championship event.

The date was June 5, 2004, and Oscar De La Hoya was headlining against relatively unknown WBO middleweight incumbent Felix Sturm at the MGM Grand in Las Vegas. De La Hoya, already a five-weight titleholder, was a huge favorite in his middleweight debut. Meanwhile, in the co-main event, Bernard Hopkins, the true division leader at 160 pounds, was defending his Ring, IBF, WBA and WBC titles against Robert Allen, whom he'd already beaten five years earlier by TKO.

De La Hoya and Hopkins had already agreed to face each other in September of that year. It was a done deal. All they had to do was knock off a couple of prohibitive underdogs and get down to real business. And then came fight night.

I was in Las Vegas as a fan with friends. We watched Hopkins deck Allen with a right hand in Round 7 before eventually claiming an unexciting 12-round unanimous decision. With his part of the deal complete, Hopkins returned to his dressing room and looked on nervously as De La Hoya labored his way to a contentious decision win over Germany's Sturm, who should have kept his then-unbeaten record and retained his title.

Before these bouts took place, the naturally bigger Hopkins was already favored to beat De La Hoya. Following those semifinal outings, "The Golden Boy" was given even less chance of springing the upset over "The Executioner," who was widely viewed as one of the greatest fighters his division had ever produced. Does this story sound familiar?

Richard Pelham

The great Inoue produced some dazzling stuff against Alan Picasso.

Almost the same scenario developed between Inoue and Nakatani at the Mohammed Abdo Arena on December 27.

Inoue was never tested and easily defended his undisputed junior featherweight championship for the sixth time by outpointing the previously unbeaten Alan Picasso. However, Mexico's Sebastian Hernandez took the heavily favored Nakatani, who was making his debut at 122 pounds, to hell and back before losing a close decision. While I had Nakatani winning the fight seven rounds to five, there were those at ringside who felt Hernandez had been ripped off.

In the aftermath, the proposed collision between Inoue and Nakatani lost some of its luster, with many suggesting that this superfight is no longer super. While neither man would state that it wasn't happening, there was no face-to-face between the multi-weight world champs after they'd won their respective bouts, which led to something of an energy dump at the end of the event. The prevailing thought among many fans and experts is that Nakatani is out of his depth.

While Hopkins would go on to puncture De La Hoya with a ninth-round body shot knockout, there's no guarantee that we'll see Inoue vs. Nakatani become a reality – at least not immediately. In fact, unbeaten Ring Magazine junior bantamweight champion Jesse "Bam" Rodriguez might be perfectly poised to gatecrash the Inoue sweepstakes. More on that later.

The whole saga closed out a fascinating week in Riyadh that produced many twists and turns.

THE MONSTER

I've covered four Naoya Inoue fights and have been honored to do so. What's interesting – and a bit unusual given that he's an authentic knockout puncher – is that on three of the four occasions I've seen him live, Inoue has been taken the distance.

In 2019, I attended what would become The Ring's Fight of the Year when Inoue outpointed the legendary Nonito Donaire in an unforgettable battle. In September of 2025, I was in Nagoya when Inoue all but whitewashed former unified junior featherweight titleholder Murodjon Akhmadaliev en route to a super-skilled 12-round unanimous decision victory.

In the main event of the Ring V card, Inoue was equally dominant against Mexican contender Picasso. However, this often masterful near-shutout marks the first time that "The Monster" has gone the full distance in back-to-back fights during his 13-year professional career.

At the post-fight press conference, I asked the champion if it's becoming more difficult to knock out bigger fighters. "To be honest with you, that's not what I feel... really," offered Japan's greatest and most accomplished world champion following an awkward pause. I don't think the question impressed him, but it was valid.

Statistically, when you compare Inoue's run at 122 pounds to those in the lower weight classes, he is going longer in fights. At junior bantamweight, his eight appearances lasted an average of 5.5 rounds. At bantamweight, a division in which he became undisputed champion, Inoue was even more ruthless with an average of 5.2 rounds across nine fights. At junior featherweight, his eight-fight average has gone all the way up to 8.4 rounds. For the most part, the opponents he's in against are naturally larger and more durable.

This is not to criticize. Any knockout artist will start to take a dip in power as they ascend the scales. It's natural. For example, when Manny Pacquiao reached welterweight, he lost a considerable amount of TNT while still retaining his pound-for-pound status. Between March 2010 and November 2016, the Filipino icon posted nine decision wins without a single knockout. Inoue, like Pacquiao, can still hurt a bigger opponent enough to keep them honest.

What was noticeable during fight week was how big Inoue has become as a sportsman. Despite not receiving the same type of fan hysteria he would have at home in Japan, Inoue carried himself with real majesty in Riyadh. However, following the weigh-in, I spotted a relaxed version of the champ with family in the hotel lobby. In a pseudo-mittwork routine, Inoue called out punches to one of his children, who responded with more than one fierce left hook-right hand combo. From my vantage point, any bullies around this kid's age group should take cover.

BIG BANG

I'm a huge fan of Junto Nakatani. What's not to like? The three-weight world champ has excellent skills, quick hands, quick feet and one-punch knockout power, and he's always in exciting fights. Already a fixture on the pound-for-pound list, he naturally wants to prove himself at the pure elite level and face Inoue.

In the co-main event of Ring V, Nakatani's habitually thunderous hitting power barely put a dent in Hernandez. The pressure fighter's ability to swallow up ground and force Nakatani to trade made for a brilliant 12-round spectacle, but some onlookers believe that Nakatani was fortunate to get the "W."

At the post-fight press conference, I asked a marked-up Nakatani for his opinions on Inoue vs. Picasso and quizzed him on what improvements he would need to make to his own game if he is to take down The Monster.

"I was very impressed with his timing," Nakatani replied via translator. "His moves were quite sharp. Picasso was brave throughout.

"How much do I need to improve [to beat Inoue]? I have something burning in my heart, so please wait and see. I fought 12 rounds and it was really tough. This was my first time fighting at a heavier [weight] class. It was an experience that will be good for my future career."

Back at the hotel following the event, I headed to the buffet. I was greeted by Nakatani's trainer, Rudy Hernandez, who gave me a look that suggested he'd had a hard day. "Man, he was tough," Hernandez told me. "I couldn't believe how tough he was. It was really close, but if someone deserved to win, then it was us."

Rudy viewed the fight the same way I did. Hernandez may have thrown more and landed more, according to CompuBox, but Nakatani's work was cleaner and easier to score. Nevertheless, even though Nakatani officially extended his record to 32-0 (24 KOs), it was Sebastian Hernandez who came away from the fight with all the plaudits while the Japanese fighter's reputation suffered a direct hit.

Bam chewed up the previously unbeaten Fernando Martinez.

BAM TO THE RESCUE

With Ring V in the history books, DAZN's Ade Oladipo went through the motions during his post-fight interview with Inoue, asking the champ about his performance against Picasso and the potential clash with Nakatani. However, he then switched gears and proposed a superfight with another pound-for-pound standout, Bam Rodriguez.

"When he's ready, and if he can fight at [junior featherweight], and if the timing is perfect, then I'd love to wait for him to challenge me," said Inoue.

When DAZN Boxing ran this clip on their X account, Bam's coach, Robert Garcia, quote-tweeted it with a picture of his fighter wrapped in world title belts, saying simply, "We'll see him soon." The statement went viral, with fans going back and forth with predictions as well as suggestions that Bam should test the waters at bantamweight before climbing all the way to junior featherweight to face such a fearsome champion.

Frustratingly, Garcia vs. Teraji was called off at the 11th hour.

One potential narrative is for Bam to challenge Inoue's younger brother, Takuma, who currently holds the WBC bantamweight title. Should Bam win that fight, and he would be heavily favored to do so, then that would be the perfect story arc for a matchup with the older brother. Naoya would be seeking revenge, while Bam would be looking to conquer a fourth division and claim the top rung in the mythical pound-for-pound ratings.

INOUE VS. BAM

Whatever happens, whether it's Inoue vs. Nakatani or Inoue vs. Bam that becomes a reality in 2026, no fight fan in their right mind will complain.

What was noticeable online was that no one doubted for a second that Bam is serious about taking on the Naoya Inoue challenge. While the Texas-born champ is due to move up to 118 pounds, a full two-weight jump to face Inoue is an audacious assignment to say the least.

Why does Bam inspire such confidence? Well, just look at the history. In February 2022, the then-22-year-old lefty stepped in on late notice and moved up in weight to fight Carlos Cuadras for the vacant WBC junior bantamweight title (Rodriguez was rated No. 5 at junior flyweight going into the bout). He prevailed by unanimous decision and kicked open the door to stardom.

Less than four months later, Bam battered the fearsome Srisaket Sor Rungvisai into submission in eight rounds, marking the ex-champ's first loss by stoppage in 13 years. Having not yet grown into the 115-pound limit, Bam soon dropped back down to flyweight and unified in that division at the expense of Cristian Gonzalez Hernandez (UD 12) and the previously unbeaten Sunny Edwards (TKO 9).

Upon returning to junior bantamweight in June 2024, Bam regained the WBC crown and claimed The Ring title by scoring the first-ever knockout victory over legendary Mexican hero Juan Francisco Estrada. He has since added two more belts by scoring impressive stoppage wins over unbeaten world titleholders Phumelela Cafu (TKO 10) and Fernando Martinez (KO 10).

In terms of quality, Bam would have to be among the finest ring technicians and counterpunchers that Inoue has ever shared the ring with. Only Nonito Donaire could provide a solid argument, though it's widely acknowledged that "The Filipino Flash" was past his best days when he faced Inoue in two fights. While he'd have plenty to worry about in this matchup, Bam's foot speed and ability to create punching angles could provide Inoue with a rare test.

So impressive is Bam's unbeaten run (23-0, 16 KOs) that he's already considered by many to be a lock for the Hall of Fame at just 26 years old. If it were anyone else coming up two weight classes for a shot at the most effective offensive force in world boxing, then we'd all be asking them to hit the brakes.

It's not just anyone – it's Bam Rodriguez.

KENSHIRO CANCELED

One of the fighters I was looking forward to seeing most on the Ring V card was former two-weight world titleholder and future Hall of Famer Kenshiro Teraji. "The Amazing Boy" was scheduled to make his junior bantamweight debut against rampaging IBF titleholder Willibaldo Garcia in what many tabbed as a potential show-stealer.

On Friday morning, I ventured down to the ballroom of the Hilton Riyadh Hotel & Residences for the official weigh-in. I sat directly behind Garcia, who appeared bone-dry and exhausted. Both fighters made weight, but Garcia couldn't get out of the room quickly enough.

Hours later, while I was at dinner, it emerged that Garcia had fallen ill after the ceremonial weigh-in and that the commission had deemed him unfit to fight. There were attempts to get a replacement opponent for Teraji, but that didn't work out, so the ex-champ had to settle for watching his countrymen in action from ringside.

The cancellation of the fight was perhaps a blessing in disguise. Per IBF rules, Garcia was only allowed to rehydrate 10 pounds before the second weigh-in, which was scheduled for 8 a.m. on the day of the fight. While this is standard, Garcia was to make his ring walk at 1 p.m. local time (KSA) to accommodate viewers in Japan. That meant the Mexican fighter had considerably less time to replenish himself in terms of food and water intake.

Teraji was gleaming on the scales and wouldn't have had the same problems. Many were calling for Garcia to move up to bantamweight after the trouble he'd had making 115 pounds.

RENOWNED PHOTOGRAPHER DAVID LACHAPELLE'S PORTRAITS OF MODERN BOXERS EXIST IN A MONOMYTHIC GLOW

BY BRIAN HARTY

Epic Style

Boxing has a certain way it likes to see things done. For photographs of fighters who aren't throwing punches, it generally likes to have guns blazing for a flex at the scale, a pre- or post-fight battle howl or a classic ready-to-rumble pose – tilted forward, fists raised and eyes locked on the camera lens.

Photographer David LaChapelle prefers a different approach. Born in Connecticut in 1963, LaChapelle dove into the pop culture scene of early-1980s New York City wrapped in an art-school fascination with Renaissance painting. After being hired by Andy Warhol to shoot photos for Interview Magazine, he developed a creatively unfettered style that merged the classical poses and lush environments of the Old Masters with contemporary fashion and celebrity culture – paying homage, provoking and having fun on the job, all at the same time. Pushing production concepts ever higher, LaChapelle incorporated storytelling with a devoutly physical approach; even well into the digital age, he and his team still construct his dreamlike sets by hand and eschew computer-generated effects.

For 40-plus years, the pop-culture immersion has continued. It would take less time to name-drop the celebrities he *hasn't* worked with. One stands out, however:

"Everyone always asks me, 'What was your most exciting photoshoot?'" LaChapelle told The Ring. "And it was – my father unfortunately wasn't alive anymore – but getting to photograph my dad's hero, and by proxy my hero, Muhammad Ali. Because it wasn't just his boxing where he was heroic. How he lived his life."

That theme resurfaced when LaChapelle was commissioned to produce a series depicting fighters of the modern era. True to form, he set aside the familiar primal screams of gladiators in favor of the silence of sacred spaces and the mythos of the hero's journey. Boxers take on a ritual significance in his photographs, descending into places where we can't go to do things we can't do, giving us glimpses of divine perfection and an elemental, otherworldly path that they walk for our sake.

And our entertainment, of course. LaChapelle understands show business as much as he does art history. As Warhol once told him, "Do whatever you want, just make everyone look good."

TERENCE CRAWFORD: The movement is an incense burner that he's holding. We had a light behind that window. The candles are lit. We shot at a very slow shutter speed, so he had to hold really still while that thing was moving. But there was no 'What are we doing? What is this for? Why am I doing this?'"

CANELO ALVAREZ: "That's from my friend who raises doves in Northern California. Mostly he releases them at funerals and weddings, and I use his doves all the time in photoshoots. It was perched on Canelo's hand and the dove wouldn't leave him. It was really amazing. His wings were not clipped. That bird could have flown any time. He wasn't wired down. So, he could have left if he wanted to, but he stayed. [Canelo is] like a gentle giant, you know? It just looked better with the bird. I was going to have him, like, pushing and breaking these columns down like Hercules, but instead we wound up with the dove."

THE CANELO-CRAWFORD FACEOFF ON THE CLIFF: "I had Colleen Atwood, the four-time Academy Award-winning costume designer – she worked on all those Tim Burton movies – and so she did the clothing for them, which was sort of like early man, you know, hunter-gatherer, kind of tribal almost. And it was kind of cool because it was like making a Hollywood movie poster. And I think it was just taking boxing into a very entertaining, exciting place, an elevated place. I mean, definitely the boxers have never been photographed that way, and they were really excited about it."

JESSE "BAM" RODRIGUEZ

It's another sacred space. Just the idea of the Holy Grail, just mysterious and kind of like wanting things to feel cinematic and like you're in the middle of a story, and kind of like movie posters of the Technicolor era. These are all inspirations, you know?"

"I'm just interested in life. I'm interested in people. I love photographing the people that make up our world."

"They were all open to the ideas. I think they're a whole new generation of boxers that are showmen, you know? I think a lot of the young boxers coming up, they're different from other athletes where they understand the entertainment value in what they're doing as well. The whole process was really fun for me and really great creatively. My whole team was working on it, building these sets and coming up with these sacred spaces that weren't too specific to any religion but just felt monumental and heroic and mythological, and that's what we were going for."

DEVIN HANEY

"I really try to use retouching to a very minimum. I'm very analog in my process. And those scenes that you see really took place. They were standing on a cliff. Crawford and Canelo, that was eight feet off the ground. That was a really big set. All the light beams and everything you see in that photograph existed in time. ... You know, the clouds above Canelo and Crawford were cotton that we painted, and then we're shining flashlights through them, shooting at a slow shutter to make it look like lightning. ... That was theatrical. That happened. I used to hate cameras shooting behind the scenes, and I used to ban them. I didn't want to give away the magic. But now I insist on it. People get really excited now when they watch *The Wizard of Oz* in high definition, because they see the wires holding the monkeys flying to the castle. People get actually more excited about that than they do CGI or post-production sort of A.I. shit. People are really not into that at all. It's very soulless."

VERGIL ORTIZ:
"He's insane in the ring. He's incredible as a fighter. But in person, he's just the most quiet sort of nice guy. Like there's nothing aggressive about these guys at all."

TEOFIMO LOPEZ:
"He is wild. He's so funny. I love this guy. He was a trip. He was the funniest of everybody. He was just dancing, and he's just a kid. He's a big kid."

"Boxers are different. A lot of football players and basketball players do not get it. They don't want it. They don't give a shit. They're difficult. And they have so many layers of people you have to get through. They're like demigods. These guys were so humble. You go right up and talk to them. They were so, so, just normal. It was kind of mind-blowing, and I wasn't expecting that. I really wasn't. I was very, very surprised. They're such cool guys. All of them. Every single one." RING

A HEAVY HEART

ICONIC BRITISH PROMOTER **FRANK WARREN** HAS ALWAYS LOVED THE HEAVYWEIGHT DIVISION – AND WHAT HE SEES IN THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE DELIGHTS HIM

By Gareth A. Davies

Frank Warren has just celebrated 45 years as a licensed boxing promoter on what has been an extraordinary journey of stamina, survival and self-belief. As well as being inducted into the sport's International Boxing Hall of Fame and putting on some of the greatest fight nights ever seen, creating the first ever exclusive boxing channel (BoxNation) and even being shot, Warren has as much vim and vigor for the industry as he ever had.

Born in 1952, Warren hails from a working-class family in Islington, North London, where his father was a bookmaker. He has always had a fighter's mentality. The list of the proteges who have walked to the ring under his Queensberry banner is extraordinary – from British boxing legends Frank Bruno to Naseem Hamed, Ricky Hatton to Joe Calzaghe, through Amir Khan to a modern heavyweight star in Tyson Fury.

In the following interview, Warren dove deep to discuss his longstanding fascination with heavyweight boxing, which began with an admiration for Muhammad Ali that was influenced by "The Greatest" coming to London twice to fight British favorite Henry Cooper. Warren was instrumental in breaking a stranglehold on boxing held by the BBC, a trio of promoters (Mickey Duff, Jarvis Astaire and Harry Levine) and the Boxing Board in the 1970s with his creation of the National Boxing Council. Working with the infamous Lenny McLean, Warren's first promotion was an unlicensed event. McLean, a family relative, had associations with London's criminal fraternity.

Warren's current stable of heavyweights is the strongest in his decorated run as one of the most influential boxing figures from the last half-century. "I believe we have eight of the top 15 heavyweights in the world right now – and not one of them is American," Warren told The Ring Magazine. They include Fury, Fabio Wardley and rising star Moses Itauma.

Warren insists the division is very healthy and looks forward to a year that he hopes will culminate in a Fury-Joshua megafight.

The Ring: Frank, what's so special about heavyweight boxing for you?
Frank Warren: When I was a kid, probably the most famous boxer in the world was Muhammad Ali, if not the most recognized face in the world. Ali was the man. It has always been a special division, and it is called the blue ribbon division for a reason.

The Ring: Do you remember watching him in the early '60s?
FW: Yes, I was a kid then. Ali was the man. He obviously fought twice in London against Henry Cooper, but I can remember the funny thing being that the older generation did not like him at the time. He was the original marmite. They loved him or they loathed him. I did not understand that, because he stood out for me. He was a superstar, and Ali would have been incredible in any era. He had the star qualities, the charisma and of course the great skills he showed in the ring.

The Ring: Ten years later, into your 20s during the 1970s, you created the National Boxing Council. People might call it unlicensed boxing, but it was basically a commission to legitimize your events and challenge the monopoly – with the Boxing Board and televised fights – that the dominant promoters had in the day.
FW: My first promotion was with the heavyweight Lenny McLean, who was a relation of mine – a bit of a bully, to be quite honest – and it happened literally by accident, and that was it. I got into the boxing game and got bitten by the bug.

The Ring: Sticking to the heavyweight theme, people have got a fascination for the division, perhaps more than any other. Why, in your view?
FW: Because it is the big men, and because it's the ultimate thing in the sport. My favorite fighter of all time, who I enjoyed watching live, however, was [Sugar] Ray Leonard. He was special, and he had everything. And he did everything. On your point on the interest in heavyweights, just a little later on in the heavyweight division, after Ali and Joe Frazier et al., was Larry Holmes. I love him. He was a great fighter. He had the best jab in boxing. He gets accolades, but over time I don't think he gets all the accolades which he deserves. For me, he was one of the best heavyweight champions in history.

"Heavyweights know they can earn if they are successful in boxing, and the momentum has grown. And as we know, success does breed success."

The Ring: So you live and work through the Ali era, then the Holmes era before going on to Mike Tyson, Lennox Lewis, Frank Bruno, Evander Holyfield, Riddick Bowe. How do those first two eras compare in your view – the Ali/Joe Frazier/George Foreman era and the Holmes era?
FW: Well, in that first era you mention, they were all involved in 15-round fights. And they all fought each other. A couple of fights got missed over the years which should have happened – Foreman-Holmes, and Lewis-Bowe in the second era you mention – but they were both great eras in my estimation. The heavyweight division always has intrigue. Even the Klitschko brothers enjoyed success and made a period of their own. They didn't really click in America, but they did big business in Germany, and they worked out that over there they had a market and could generate as much money on the gate in Germany as they could generate from American TV. They had a few fights in America, but the power base was the German market.

The Ring: I did report on two Wladimir Klitschko fights in New York, and he was almost booed out of the arena. I remember the late, great Bert Randolph Sugar saying to me, sitting in the media seats, 'Wake me up when the fight breaks out.' Klitschko did not throw a right hand sometimes until a few rounds into a fight.
FW: They were very, very technical fighters, clever guys, and they played to their strengths. But they weren't exciting to watch, even though Vitali had that terrific fight with Lennox, and Wladimir had the great fight with Anthony Joshua at Wembley Stadium in 2017. My guy Tyson Fury, of course, created one of the great moments in 2015 when he dethroned Wladimir on a famous night in Dusseldorf. It set the wheels in motion for the era we are now seeing the end of. I had always thought Tyson Fury had the right skills to defeat Wladimir, and for me it was not a shock. I'd always said publicly that Tyson would beat him.

But what I would add is that going back to the Ali-Frazier-Foreman era, the British heavyweights weren't bloody good enough over the years at that point. We had the likes of Cooper. We had Brian London. Not compared to now. I mean, look at the Brits at the moment.

The Ring: So we come to the last 10 years with the rise of Tyson Fury and Anthony Joshua, and obviously Tyson broke the mold 10 years ago by beating Klitschko. And it really has been an incredible, if we can say this, an incredible decade for heavyweight boxing from Britain. What do you put it down to? Do you think Anthony Joshua and Tyson Fury have inspired a young generation of heavyweights to come through?

Warren took the popular Frank Bruno to a WBC heavyweight crown.

FW: I think we've benefited, and it is pretty well-documented now, from our amateur system, our Olympic success and from not having a lot of our big guys going into American football and basketball, which is largely what has happened in the U.S., in my view. Our heavyweights are too big for football (soccer), and most of our boxers haven't gone into rugby union. Heavyweights know they can earn if they are successful in boxing, and the momentum has grown. And as we know, success does breed success. We now have a long list of British heavyweights, plus Joseph Parker and Agit Kabayel, promoted by us over here.

The Ring: Tyson Fury is still going. Do you expect him to have an active year in 2026? Will we see Fury against Anthony Joshua?
FW: It will come down to the money and what is available. We talk, but Tyson was busy in 2025 with Netflix and other projects. If the right money is there, I suspect we will see the Joshua fight. Whoever Tyson fights will be a big fight. For one thing, though, we must remember that you can't make someone fight.

Tyson's wife, Paris, and his dad, John, don't want him to fight. It will come down to the finances and the timing. We all hope they fight, but this has happened before. We never got to see Lennox Lewis against Riddick Bowe. And Mike Tyson against Lennox arguably came 10 years too late. I'm sure they will do it. I think we'll see Tyson back in 2026. And if it does happen, it would fill out Wembley or any other big stadium four times in a heartbeat. [Editor's note: Shortly before we went to press, it was announced that Fury-Joshua is in the works.]

The Ring: Will Fury and Joshua have regrets if they don't fight? Will the era seem incomplete?
FW: That is a question for them. Maybe investment from Saudi Arabia can get it over the line as well. Look at what has happened over the last two years, with the premium being paid by His Excellency and the Saudi Arabians in a real push to make the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia a destination. They're very successful in what they're doing, not just in boxing but in sports and entertainment, and in the coming years, they have the World Cup and so forth. They can afford to do this. Imagine if we were getting a huge budget off UK Tourism to do the same. We could compete at that level, but we can't. So at the moment, the biggest names are expecting major paydays, and we have to meet those demands. As I said, you

can't make people fight. It is a choice. Time will tell on this.

The Ring: Can you sum up for me how extraordinary that period has been, from Dusseldorf to the trilogy of fights in America with Deontay Wilder, and then the journey to the Middle East which has shaped the heavyweight division and this era?
FW: Fury always had the potential to become a global superstar, both inside and outside the sport. The extra things with award-winning books and his own brand and two Netflix series are part of how he has developed and what he has about him. You can never finally envisage things. He's got a great personality. You know, he's a funny guy. He's captured interest in the heavyweight division. He has set records, because there is massive interest in him, as much as a human being as a fighter.

"... after 45 years as a licensed promoter, I can honestly say that this era is as good as any in the past."

We had 270,000 people in an online queue wanting tickets for Wembley Stadium when he fought Dillian Whyte – in other words, we could have sold it out three times over. There was a record-breaking gate in Las Vegas for his fight with Wilder. People might like you or not as a sports person, but with Tyson, the public buys into his story in many ways. His backstory, the life in there, is perhaps even bigger than the boxing. He has become an ambassador for mental health issues, and [people] can identify. The changes have been huge, and the public has been on that journey with him. He has got so much enthusiasm and crossover stardom qualities. Yes, he's still got a black dog that can be there sometimes, but boxing's been a savior for him. He's also got a good family behind him.

The Ring: But there has been no letting up, with a raft of other heavyweights coming through, as well as Joshua on his concurrent journey and ups and downs. Could you ever have envisaged when Fury first won the belt that you were going to be in this position? And how have you got here?
FW: Did I think I'd be in this position? No, I didn't. How have I – or we – got here? Through work, hard work. We have a good team around us.

Fabio Wardley has broken free of the pack and now holds a world title.

Obviously, I've got my son George as the CEO, Francis working as a manager and looking to provide us with a conveyor belt of talent. We always pride ourselves on building fighters properly. We're doing really well, and we're good at what we do. There is never an easy day either, no extraordinary days – they are all normal days, because the problems come and you get on with it. I suppose I'm conditioned to it now, if truth be told, and after 45 years as a licensed promoter, I can honestly say that this era is as good as any in the past. People are going to the stadiums for big fights. But you can watch so much of it online. Boxing, in my opinion, is on a massive, massive high.

For many, Moses Itauma is the British boxing superstar of the future.

The Ring: Will the conveyor belt of talent continue for the next decade?
FW: The boxers coming through have elevated the division behind Tyson. Fabio Wardley, Moses Itauma, Lawrence Okolie and others; Joseph Parker, Agit Kabayel. There is almost an embarrassment of riches right now in the heavyweight division, and we are making bloody good heavyweight fights. Look at what Fabio has achieved, for example. And all of these heavyweights will go on to fight each other in the next two or three years. Some have been on Riyadh Season events, where there have been some great fights. And we've done some great fights ourselves. Look at the fights in the U.K. – Usyk-Dubois, Dubois-Joshua; they were massive events.

The Ring: So, to the prodigy in your Queensberry Promotions stable. Do you believe Moses is going to win a world title in 2026? How talented is this guy, and is he a gift to the British sporting public and to heavyweight boxing?
FW: Moses has gone from junior boxing straight into fighting men. That's what's happened with him. That's the bottom line of all of it. That's what he's done. I can't even think of a 20-year-old in my time in boxing who has fought the quality of opposition that he has, apart from Mike Tyson. Moses is a prodigy. As a person, he is mature for his age. He's got a good head on his shoulders.

The Ring: So is he a guy that could go on to achieve great things in your view in the sport? Is he good enough to unify or become an undisputed heavyweight champion?
FW: Again, as I have said, we will test Moses fight by fight. We believe we have a very special talent, and given what he has learned already from the experience he has, he has the capability to become a great boxer. But again, fight by fight, year by year.

The Ring: Finally, Frank, if you had a magic wand to cast over the heavyweight division, what would you do?
FW: We don't need a magic wand. We are in rude health. All we need to do is to keep the best fighting the best. And we do our utmost every day to make that happen. The heavyweight division is in the best place it has been for a very long time. The public are interested, and it's very exciting. RING

Gareth A Davies is boxing correspondent for The London Telegraph and Talksport.

PROSPECT WATCH:

Pat Brown

By Dom Farrell

Ordinarily, when a 4-0 British prospect steps out on an undercard in the U.S., a promoter would expect to be working overtime to get their man a couple of soundbites here and there. Eddie Hearn is always braced for that sort of work. But when Manchester cruiserweight Pat Brown took on one-time Dmitry Bivol foe Felix Valera in Orlando last November, the Matchroom chief was on Easy Street.

After taking the measure of his man during a methodical and astute opener, Brown unleashed hell in Round 2, decking Valera three times en route to a fifth successive knockout win in eight months as a professional. The second knockdown gave a picture-book demonstration of Brown's honey punch, the lead left hook. The third led to the bout being waved off instantly when a short right hand put the Dominican veteran flat on his face.

"Luis DeCubas Sr. came up to me and said, 'Wow, this kid's like a young Rocky Marciano,'" Hearn beamed in the ring afterward, one of the more seasoned operators of the promotional game having done his job for him. "So that's my new name for him: 'Manchester's Rocky Marciano.' This kid is going to go all the way. We've got a diamond on our hands."

An accomplished amateur who represented Great Britain in the heavyweight category (weight limit of about 201 pounds) at the Paris 2024 Olympic Games, Brown began his career at Sale West ABC, the same club where British boxing icon Ricky Hatton took some of his first steps. Sale West is now run by Brown's father, Mike, who was a beaming example of parental pride throughout fight week in Orlando. He also bequeathed his "Bomber" nickname to his son.

"He had a handful of amateur fights, only had about 12. People knew about him more outside the ring, to be honest, just from fisticuffs," Pat explains. "He was never a bully, my dad; he just had a reputation of having a hard dig on him. That's where the nickname comes from. It got given to me without any choice. But he's great, a proper working man, proper old-school."

"Old-school" is a label that comes up frequently in conversation with Brown, and always as a desirable guiding principle. Whether it's a no-nonsense work ethic in the gym under the watchful eye of trainer Jamie Moore; his favorite fighters, such as Evander Holyfield; or the traditional route through the ranks that he wants to plot. The winner of the English cruiserweight title fight between champion John Hedges and Ellis Zorro on December 17 is viewed as an obvious next opponent before targeting British and European honors.

And there is nothing more thrillingly old-school than raw, sense-scrambling, fight-ending power. No matter the era or style, it's what fighters and fans want more than anything else. Brown has it, and has it to the extent that this does not feel like one of those early-career KO streaks that dwindles once a boxer moves up through the levels.

"It's so difficult to explain," says Moore before doing a very decent job of vividly describing Brown's power. "Sometimes it feels like he's [going] to snap my arm in two, especially with that left hook. His left hook's phenomenal."

Brown turned pro in March with a brutal stoppage of Federico Grandone.

Gym-mate Dave Allen believes Brown's left hook is the hardest punch he's ever taken. The resurgent British boxing folk hero has sparred most heavyweights worth talking about over the past decade.

"He was always a puncher, but with the hand-wrapping as it is in the pros, as opposed to the amateurs, and the gloves[, it has] made such a huge difference," Moore explains. "He wore 12-ounce gloves in the amateurs and wears 10-ounce now. But the actual fabrics are different. A lot of the pro ones are horsehair, not foam padding. Even just to touch them, they're rock-solid. So, you put one of those tools on Pat Brown's hand … Jesus, my physio's earned a fortune over the past eight months on my shoulders and elbows through the wear and tear of taking him and Dave Allen put together."

It's reasonable to expect any big man who has boxed at the level Brown has to be able to bang. But even before he boasted such a strapping frame, "Bomber" was explosive.

"Ever since I was a kid, I've always had a dig on me," he says. "Even when I was a skinny, lean, little boy, I used to have the crack and the whip. I think it's just genetics, and I've always punched with bad intentions anyway. That's the way I've been trained.

"In the moment, once I smell blood and smell that they're hurt, I don't think anything other than 'I'm coming to get you.' After, I'll look at it, and it's, 'Wow, I wasn't expecting that,' as if I've done that, and I start pinching myself a little bit. It's quite bad, really. When I get in the ring, I just turn into something else. I always have done.

"I never remember in the moment what I've actually done; it's always afterwards. I don't even believe myself that I'm doing it. I would say that's the way I'm wired. When I smell it and I'm going in for the kill, I'm all for it. I'm immersed in it all."

This detached viciousness was there for all to see in the manner his two most recent opponents – Austine Nnamdi and Valera, each selected by Moore and co-manager Sam Jones to give Brown rounds – were dispatched inside two. People in the game are noticing, even if that reveals itself in unhelpful ways. Richard Riakporhe, Isaac Chamberlain and Peter Fury-trained heavyweight Matty Harris gave Brown quality work in the Valera camp, but Moore has noticed a pattern of other sparring partners pulling out on short notice.

A consequence of this was Brown and Allen being allowed to spar once again, a year after a now-infamous gym war forced Moore to read the riot act. "It was a two-round ding-dong and Jamie had to pull the plug," Brown recalls. "It really did get messy; it was just a brawl. You can't be doing that all the time."

It left Moore playing the unfamiliar role of disciplinarian school principal. "The first round went OK, but just towards the end they started going at each other. And I said, 'I'm telling you, lads, if you go back out like that again now, it's done.' Thirty seconds in, they're absolutely knocking the shit out of each other. There's me, 5-foot-9, telling two lumps like that to get the fuck out. I said, 'I'm not doing this. You're teammates. It's not good for either of you. I'm not having it.'"

Lewis Oakford succumbed to a first-round knockout in March.

Despite protestations from both men, the former European junior middleweight champion stood firm until there was another late withdrawal for a Brown sparring session. Allen was preparing for his shot at hulking Russian Arslanbek Makhmudov. The trainer relented, and his two charges – two firm friends – produced quality work.

"In the gym, me and Dave have a laugh, but we help each other out and we push each other," Brown says. "Dave, as everyone knows, is a very particular person. He's not cut from the same cloth as most people. He can be very odd, and I'm sort of similar in ways.

We're kind of on the same wavelength. It's good training alongside him, but it's not always laughs and jokes. We know it's the hurt business. We know it's a serious game."

Brown thriving in these conditions to make unblemished progress as a professional is just as well, because the clock is ticking on his time as a cruiserweight. Moore does not want to deplete a big puncher as he enters his prime years. As soon as it feels like that is the case, the heavyweight division will be calling.

"In 18 months' time, he's going to be in the position where we're looking at moving up," says Brown's coach. "And, if everything goes to plan the way we expect it to, he's probably fighting for a [cruiserweight] world title about that time. If he does get a shot at a world title and wins it, he'd probably move straight up."

Boxing has a habit of making a mockery of such precise plans. Sitting as we are in Oleksandr Usyk's imperial period, the heavyweight division is not the land of the giants that it used to be. But if Brown managed to take out the British cruiserweight title by next summer before tackling an international title fight in September 2026, and seeing how the land lays in the upper reaches of the 200-pound division 12 months from now, his timing could be perfect.

Once he joins the heavyweight ranks, expect talk of an all-British superfight with Moses Itauma to emerge. There are sparring stories there, too, from Brown and Itauma's time together in the GB amateur setup, albeit with everyone on their best behavior.

"God, what a fight that would be further down the line," says Moore. "It's early days and sometimes people start talking about jumping the gun, and I get that. But for me, that'd be the dream fight: Pat against someone like Itauma at Old Trafford."

If that comes to pass, you won't be able to move for Hearn wheeling out DeCubas' "Manchester Rocky Marciano" line. RING

SPECIAL BREW

AT JUST 26 YEARS OLD, **JESSE "BAM" RODRIGUEZ** IS ALREADY A LOCK FOR THE HALL OF FAME, AND THE POUND-FOR-POUND STAR'S GREATEST NIGHTS ARE POTENTIALLY STILL AHEAD OF HIM.

By Corey Erdman

If you were to show a picture of Jesse "Bam" Rodriguez to someone on the street and ask them to guess which sport he was a professional in, it's far more likely that they would say skateboarding than boxing. It's hard for the layperson to fathom the reality that a 115-pound man is one of the most dangerous people on the planet, and Rodriguez does very little in how he carries himself outside of the ring to disavow anyone of that notion. Standing 5-foot-4, the heavily tattooed and bespectacled Rodriguez is typically sipping a coffee, seemingly always sporting a friendly grin along with an outfit fresh out of the latest streetwear catalogue.

In November, Bam annihilated previously unbeaten titleholder Fernando Martinez.

Defensive wizard Sunny Edwards proved easy to find for Bam.

Chris Esqueda

But even the most casual of fans shown footage of Rodriguez in the ring could instantly identify that not only is he a fighter, but a special one. Few, if any fighters in the sport ace the eye test in the way Rodriguez does. If you had no understanding of boxing whatsoever, seeing his thudding knockouts would make his talent level apparent. But if you have even a passing familiarity with what boxing generally looks like, even seeing Rodriguez move in the ring would trigger receptors indicating "this isn't normal."

Fighters tend to have a particular rhythm and bounce in their gait as they traverse the ring. When Rodriguez moves, it's as if he's floating, his feet always in position to punch. In fact, watching a Bam fight can often be like watching the annoyingly, effortlessly good kid at the skate park, gliding around performing normally difficult tricks with ease. Rodriguez turns the boxing ring into his halfpipe, a venue for him to perform the things his mind and body can imagine but others cannot.

On November 22, Rodriguez dug into his bag of tricks once again while demolishing Fernando "Puma" Martinez, defending his Ring Magazine junior bantamweight championship and adding another sanctioning body strap to his overflowing collection. There was hardly a second, let alone a round, in the 9½ frames of action where it was not abundantly clear that the No. 1 fighter in the division was leaps and bounds above the No. 2 fighter in the division.

Take the closing sequence of the fight in the 10th round. Rodriguez had spent the better part of nine rounds hounding Martinez all over the ring, taming the normally relentless Puma and battering him with superior hand speed and power. Just as the action started to get redundant, Rodriguez decided to experiment and go on the defensive in search of the perfect knockout shot. He pedaled around the ring, hands at his side, and slipped six consecutive punches from a reigning world champion before landing a perfect counter left hand that ended the fight. As you watch the slow-motion replay of the knockout, you can see Rodriguez smiling knowingly, as if he knew the feat he was about to perform but the audience didn't yet. With Martinez flat on his back, Rodriguez stood defiantly over him, hands still at his side, a visual of sporting superiority as clear as any you'll ever see.

As high as Rodriguez's Q-rating was coming into the Martinez fight, the nature of his dominance seemed to boost his standing in the eyes of the boxing public once again. At the time of this writing, Rodriguez sits at No. 4 in the pound-for-pound rankings, behind only Naoya Inoue, Oleksandr Usyk and Terence Crawford. But there are the pound-for-pound rankings, the ones this publication compiles, and there is the broader pound-for-pound *discussion* in the boxing community. Crawford's and Usyk's achievements justifiably place them in the top two spots based on The Ring's criteria. However, we've reached a point at which making the argument that the present version of Bam Rodriguez is the most skilled fighter on the planet would not be utterly dismissed. After Rodriguez's win over Martinez, DAZN commentator Todd Grisham remarked that Rodriguez would be favored over Naoya Inoue. It was a bit of playful hyperbole from Grisham, but it served as something of a thought experiment. Oddsmakers would certainly favor Inoue, but how high of an ascent in weight and achievement is actually unfathomable for Rodriguez?

Rodriguez has said in a number of interviews that his intention is to retire from the sport by the age of 30 to run a coffee shop. Provided we take him at his word, that's less than five years remaining for him to grow as much as he's going to grow and win as much as he's going to win. That said, everything Rodriguez has achieved to this point in his career has come in a three-and-a-half-year time frame. His breakout win over Carlos Cuadras seems like a generation ago, especially considering Cuadras' recent retirement, but it only came in 2022. Rodriguez was, of course, a late replacement in that fight, not a fighter on the radar of a major network whatsoever, and now he is one of the focal points of the entire sport.

In that period of time alone, Rodriguez has compiled a resume at 115 – forgetting his dalliance at 112 to defeat that division's trickiest fighter at the time, Sunny Edwards – that places him amid the greatest of all time in the division. As we went to press, it appeared as though Rodriguez was waiting on the winner of the imminent Willibaldo Garcia-Kenshiro Teraji IBF title fight to schedule a final unification bout. The winner would become the first undisputed 115-pound champion.

Is it possible that Rodriguez is a win away from having an argument for being on the junior bantamweight Mount Rushmore?

For all intents and purposes, the history of the 115-pound weight class begins in 1980 with the WBC's formal recognition of the division, when Rafael Orono became the inaugural champion in defeating Seung-Hoon Lee. Gustavo Ballas became the first WBA titleholder the following year, and in 1983, Ju-Do Chun cut the ribbon for the IBF. The WBO would join the party in 1989 as Jose Ruiz upset "Sugar Baby" Rojas to become its first champ.

No conversation about the greatest 115-pound fighters of all time can be had without discussing Khaosai Galaxy, who is generally regarded as the best to ever grace the weight class. "The Thai Tyson" put together a run of dominance and longevity that would be hard to accomplish in the current landscape, making 19 defenses of his WBA world title. Galaxy scored 16 knockouts in those bouts, with only three men ever hearing the final bell against him in a world title bout. That spot as the consensus junior bantamweight GOAT was achieved even without the dream bout between him and contemporary Jiro Watanabe ever materializing. Despite that, Watanabe could certainly never be accused of "ducking the smoke," as half of his career took place in world title bouts, and the only fighter who beat him in his 14 title fights was Gilberto Roman – a man who also has an argument for placement in this mythical commemorative sculpture.

Sung-Kil Moon would take the mantle from Galaxy and Watanabe as the dominant 115-pounder in the early '90s before Johnny Tapia emerged and helped bring the division to the mainstream – or, more pertinently, the United States. "Mi Vida Loca" racked up 43 wins without a loss

The great Juan Francisco Estrada was stopped for the first time.

Matthew Heasley

in the division, including 13 world title defenses. As Tapia moved up in weight, dominant champions such as Masamori Tokuyama and Fernando Montiel emerged and compiled resumes that put them in Mount Rushmore consideration as well.

Because of the relatively brief lifespan of the division, and also its over-indexing of fighters from Asia, where title unification bouts haven't been a priority in past years, Rodriguez has a genuine chance of establishing himself as one of the division's GOATs with a small handful of additional wins. To this point, what he's accomplished at both junior bantamweight and flyweight – seven wins over current or former world titleholders – is more than all of the great champions listed above. Though one has to take into consideration the proliferation of titles and the fact that more beltholders are available to fight these days, Rodriguez certainly hasn't been facing paper tigers, much less collecting paper titles. Central to Bam's mythology is the fact that he cleared out the prodigious generation of champions that helped further popularize the division, defeating Cuadras, Srisaket Sor Rungvisai and Juan Francisco Estrada. Only his friendship with and mentorship from Roman "Chocolatito" Gonzalez prevented him from making it a clean sweep. More recently, Rodriguez has turned his attention to the current generation, wiping out then-reigning titleholders Phumelele Cafu and Martinez in subsequent fights.

As consistent as Rodriguez's schedule has been, matching Galaxy's 19 title defenses within the division would be a tall task, particularly if he does intend to retire at the age of 30. Working against Rodriguez is also the benefit that past fighters in these arguments tend to enjoy, which is that their caliber of competition has had time to be fully contextualized and appreciated. Gilberto Roman, for example, having faced Moon, Watanabe, Rojas, Santos Laciar and Nana Konadu, for example, had an incredibly difficult schedule, in retrospect. Regardless of what Rodriguez does the rest of the way, however, he can pretty comfortably count on having beaten one Hall of Famer (Estrada), and a handful of others (Sor Rungvisai, Cuadras, Pedro Guevara) who will likely at least see their names on the ballot.

But just as the aforementioned "eye test" aids Rodriguez in his current evaluation, it will do the same when considering his placement amongst the all-time divisional greats. Relative to the field of active fighters across all weight classes, it's possible that the present-day version of Bam Rodriguez is held in higher esteem than any junior bantamweight has been before. Only two fighters at Rodriguez's weight or lighter have been ranked higher than Bam is presently in Ring Magazine's pound-for-pound rankings: Gonzalez and Ricardo Lopez. One other man, Michael Carbajal, reached No. 4 on the list where Rodriguez currently sits.

Of course, there are necessary caveats when presenting this as evidence, too. The Ring's ratings debuted in 1989, so by the time Galaxy and Moon appeared in the ratings (both peaked at No. 8 in annual ratings), they were a year or two away from retirement. There is also the possibility that as worldly and educated as the ratings panel would have been at the time, no one is immune to either environmental bias or bias towards fighters they had seen live or in-person. Fighters like Galaxy and Moon were tape-trader favorites but were otherwise curiosities that came alive in this publication's pages for the majority of the boxing audience.

That said, the improved visibility that Rodriguez enjoys is in large part an advantage of his own creation. The industry-wide and cultural shift that has improved the visibility of lighter weight classes was due to names like Carbajal and Tapia breaking glass ceilings in the American marketplace, followed by Chocolatito, Estrada, Cuadras and Sor Rungvisai becoming mainstays on premium cable and later streaming services. However, if Rodriguez hadn't emerged as he did – as a thrilling, U.S.-based destroyer – to take the torch, it's possible that enthusiasm for the lighter weight classes would have diminished or simply retreated to Asia and Mexico where it has always had a home base.

When comparing fighters, one tends to default to visceral feelings about them, something Rodriguez's talent level seems to evoke in everyone who watches him – equal and opposite to the reaction his stature, look and humble attitude produce. It might not appear as though the man in the wire-frame glasses and oversized Supreme tee can fight, but to see him in the ring is to recognize that he is indeed as talented as the greatest of the men his size to ever fight. The aspiring barista has just been on the world level for the span of a cup of coffee, but he may already be as good as the world has ever seen.

The unbeaten Bam is one of the most decorated fighters in boxing.

Mark Robinson

SUPER FLY

Despite being a modern weight class, there have been some brilliant junior bantamweight champions over the past 45 years.

JOHNNY TAPIA
World Title Reign: 1994-1998
Total Defenses: 13

KHAOSAI GALAXY
World Title Reign: 1984-1991
Total Defenses: 19

MASAMORI TOKUYAMA
World Title Reign: 2000-2004, 2005-2006
Total Defenses: 9

JIRO WATANABE
World Title Reign: 1982-1984, 1984-1986
Total Defenses: 10

FERNANDO MONTIEL
World Title Reign: 2002-2003, 2005-2008
Total Defenses: 8

SUNG-KIL MOON
World Title Reign: 1990-1993
Total Defenses: 9

VIC DARCHINYAN
World Title Reign: 2008-2010
Total Defenses: 4
(includes two-belt title unification bout and one defense of the unified titles)

MARIO'S WORLD

WELTERWEIGHT TITLEHOLDER **MARIO BARRIOS** RESENTS AND WELCOMES BEING WRITTEN OFF IN EQUAL MEASURE. THE TEXAS-BORN TECHNICIAN NOW TAKES AIM AT RYAN GARCIA, WHO IS THE LATEST FIGHTER TO SEE HIM AS A STEPPING STONE.

By Joseph Santoliquito

Mario Barrios wears the face he thinks everyone wants to see. It's a genial, approachable facade that masks the roiling, bubbling tension within. The WBC welterweight titleholder is set to fight Ryan Garcia on February 21 in Las Vegas. And Barrios knows why: "I'm supposed to lose. I'm supposed to be this guy's comeback fight. They handpicked me because they think I'm an easy touch, and they had better start thinking again. It pisses me off. I'm not going to lie; it pisses me off, and someone is going to pay. Ryan Garcia is going to pay."

Being thought of as an easy mark has been good for Barrios in the past. It got him a fight with Hall of Famer Manny Pacquiao last July, ruled a majority draw. Beyond that, he enjoyed a large platform on the Jake Paul-Mike Tyson undercard, which was streamed on Netflix to a far larger audience than boxing typically gets. That night, Barrios and Abel Ramos thrilled the fans in attendance at AT&T Stadium in Arlington, Texas, as they fought to a bloody split draw.

Barrios (29-2-2, 18 KOs) has received great paydays and great exposure, and he now has another excellent fight to build his brand, this time against the enigmatic Garcia (24-2, 20 KOs).

Every fighter at one time or another, from Muhammad Ali to Mike Tyson, complains about the lack of respect they receive during their careers from the boxing media and the sport's fan base. In Barrios' case, the fact that he is not getting the respect he feels he deserves is why he has been getting these choice fights.

Barrios was in attendance for the Isaac "Pitbull" Cruz-Lamont Roach Jr. fight in San Antonio in early December, there to announce and promote his upcoming fight against Garcia. One of boxing's genuinely good guys, Barrios signed autographs and mingled with fans inside the Frost Bank Center during the Cruz-Roach fight, which ended in a very relatable majority draw.

But Barrios also heard the muttering in the crowd and saw the doubts people had about him beating Garcia on social media.

In his last fight, Garcia suffered a massive upset loss to Rolando "Rolly" Romero on the May 2 megacard in New York City's Times Square. Garcia was coming off a one-year suspension for testing positive for ostarine, a performance-enhancing drug, which turned his stunning April 2024 majority-decision victory over Devin Haney into a no-contest. In that fight, Garcia dropped Haney in the seventh, 10th and 11th rounds.

Romero was served on a plate for

Barrios and Abel Ramos fought to a draw on the Paul-Tyson card.

Garcia to set up a Haney rematch.

Only Romero spoiled it, putting on the best performance of his career, dropping Garcia in the second round and gliding to a unanimous decision. Garcia was never able to launch his trademark left hook – or do anything against Romero, for that matter.

Now enter Barrios, The Ring's No. 10-ranked welterweight.

Barrios, 30, knows the math. The 27-year-old Garcia is supposed to do to him what he failed to do to Romero.

"I'm training with a purpose, and this is one fight that I have to leave a statement with for all the people counting me out even before I step in the ring," said Barrios, whose two losses have come against Gervonta "Tank" Davis and Keith Thurman in consecutive fights in 2021 and 2022. He is 3-2-2 over his last seven bouts. "The way I am counted out, I know I must have the kind of performance where I leave people in awe. Ryan Garcia bit off more than he can chew for a comeback fight. He's already looking at a Haney rematch. That's a big mistake."

Barrios admits it motivates him when he takes his morning runs. His long training sessions are filled with internal dialogue.

"I channel a lot of that energy going through those workouts, and I think to myself after two, three hours, 'Why the fuck am I doing this?' he says. "Because motherfuckers like Garcia think that shit is sweet and he can walk right in and take my title. He is already looking past this fight like he looked past the Rolly fight. I worked my ass off to be in the position that I am in. And if it means people are looking down on me, and it opens doors, I'll take it. I'll take that at the bargaining table.

"People want to see me as an easy mark, great; it gives me more opportunities. But once we are in that ring and they want to look at me like that, that is their mistake. That's the mistake this guy is going to make with me. I have more heart and more skill than he does. I have more determination than he does. I live in a real world. He doesn't. I'm away from my baby girl right now to get

The legendary Pacquiao also held Barrios to a draw in July.

ready for this fight, and each day I am away from her motivates me more."

His daughter, Metztli, a name derived from Barrios' Aztec heritage, will be 18 months old when the Garcia fight takes place. Barrios' motivation to provide for her is based as much in a tragic past as it is the present.

When Barrios was just seven weeks old, his father, Mario Sr., was incarcerated for murdering Barrios' 1-year-old sister Esperanza, who died from a lacerated heart caused by an impact blow to the chest. Mario later channeled his rage into fighting, which he learned from his older sister Selina. In October 2020, Mario Sr. was released from prison.

"That's why this fight is so important to me, because I'm going to be a father to my daughter since my father was not a father to me growing up," Barrios said. "It took me a while, but I forgave my father. He never asked me for it. My father was a different man when he was drunk; that's the version of him that I was angry with.

"The whole thing taught me to provide. I know what it is like having people stare at you in a grocery line with food stamps. Since my daughter's birth, I am a different man. I am a new man. My sister and I did not have a father for years, and I'm able to break the cycle that happened to us. Even in the short time my daughter has been alive, it is the best feeling in the world being a father, better than any feeling I ever had in boxing. I will answer the questions."

ADDRESSING THE CORNER ISSUE

Hall of Fame trainer Joe Goossen started training Barrios the third week of November at the behest of Bob Santos, one of Barrios' former trainers and currently his co-manager with Luis DeCubas Jr.

In his last two fights, both draws, Barrios admits there was "a little headbutting going on in the corner." After training early in his career with Santos, Barrios went to Virgil Hunter, then returned to Santos, The Ring's 2022 Trainer of the Year. In Barrios' last two fights, Santos was joined in the corner by Richard Barrientes, the father of twin prospects Chavez and Angel Barrientes. Barrios was receiving conflicting directions.

In the sixth round of the Ramos fight, he pulled back with his right hand down. That's when Ramos floored him. It was the third time in his career he'd tasted the canvas, having been knocked down twice in the Davis fight.

"I was sitting there with my team, Luis and Bob, and we decided a change of scenery and a change of coach would be good," said Barrios. "I'm very familiar with Joe, who knows me from earlier in my career from commentating on a lot of my fights. I knew a lot of fighters Joe trained.

"Early on, I went with Virgil Hunter and saw a lot of progress. Then I moved to Vegas and worked with Bob and Richard Barrientes and definitely felt I had a lot of growth there. Now I am with Joe, who I plan to be with these next couple of years, during a part of my career where I plan on doing as much as I can. I want to end this part of my career with grace. Joe will bring out the best in me."

Goossen, who briefly served as

The last fighter to defeat Barrios was Keith Thurman in 2022.

trainer for Garcia in 2022 and 2023, says he did not feel he had to fix anything in Barrios' arsenal; he wanted to add to it. When Goossen asked Barrios how many rounds he did on the heavy bag, jumping rope, pounding the double-end bags, the weave bag, the speed bag, Barrios answered half of what Goossen was putting him through.

What surprised Goossen is how large Barrios is: six feet tall with a 71-inch reach. The other shock was Barrios' power – and that he apparently wasn't using it. His last KO victory came against Jovanie Santiago in February 2023.

For Garcia to respect Barrios, Barrios is going to have to come with some hurt in his fists.

Goossen has tried to cover the gamut: judging distance, getting under punches and working shorter punches. Goossen believes in building his fighters from the feet up. Defense has been an emphasis. He wants Barrios' hand placement and elbow positioning to be second nature by the time he fights Garcia – parts of his game that were obviously faulty in the Ramos fight.

"We did things in steps," Goossen said. "I didn't realize how hard Mario hit, and how big he is, and not because he is heavy, but because he is tall and broad-shouldered. He will be hitting much harder when things are said and done. I will guarantee that. It is always good to have another eye looking at you.

"You increase any fighter's confidence with additional weapons. Mario Barrios is the world welterweight champion. I don't want to invent the wheel here. You want to learn something new as frequently as you can. I commend Mario on wanting to get better. World champions at this stage of their careers think you cannot teach them anything new. We made Mario think."

It's been drill, drill, drill – and most importantly, it was coming from one voice.

"Sometimes, with too many coaches, there are too many cooks in the kitchen," said Santos. "There has to be a protocol in the corner. You have one head coach and he is the only one who speaks up."

Santos, who has one of the best reputations in boxing, stepped aside to place Barrios in the best position to win. That meant going to Goossen, Santos' mentor.

"People want to see me as an easy mark, great; it gives me more opportunities. But once we are in that ring and they want to look at me like that, that is their mistake."

"When I was with Barrios in San Antonio, I could see a sense of relief in him," Santos said. "When I spoke to Joe about that, I told him, 'I can see the kid really feeling alive again.' Once I saw that, I knew we made the right move. I have no doubt in my mind Mario could beat Ryan Garcia. The question is: Will you get your head right, and are you willing to pay the price to get it done? Mario needed to refocus. It's why it is encouraging. He also has to hear from one voice. He is now."

From a distance, Bill and Devin Haney are watching. Devin is coming off a master class performance in taking the WBO welterweight title from Brian Norman Jr. in November. A Barrios victory could set up a unification fight with Haney, and a Garcia victory would get the wheels spinning for the rematch Devin has wanted since their April 2024 fight.

"Mario gets underestimated, and it is what Pacquiao thought, and he got caught," said Bill Haney, Devin's father, trainer and manager. "Garcia thinks he is going to blow Mario out of the water. But if Mario tries to match speed with Garcia, he is going to come up short. Mario is a good guy who doesn't say too much. He has been in wars. It causes people to think he has nothing left, and he keeps coming back. Mario will never leave. Mario Barrios is a real fighter, and there has to be another real fighter across the ring to upstage him. There are not many out there.

"The names on Mario's resume who have beaten him are some bad motor scooters: Keith Thurman and Tank Davis. Mario is a scalp who looks good on anyone's resume. They think he's soft until he hits someone up on the side of the head. Their opinion changes. We can relate. Devin doesn't get any respect. No one came back from what Devin did. We're back on top. We just have to get Rolly Romero to stop ducking. Ryan Garcia better not underestimate Mario Barrios."

Who knows what kind of fighter Garcia is at this stage of his career: The dubious but aggressive version who showed up against Haney, or the hollow, listless fighter who showed up against Romero. Because of Garcia's past, Barrios made sure extra measures were taken: Drug-testing began for the fight in early December.

"I wanted a lot of testing and have been tested for the last five years. I have nothing to hide," Barrios said. "When Garcia and his people wanted this fight, [the Voluntary Anti-Doping Association] was part of the deal. VADA had to be part of the deal. As soon as this fight was being talked about, there was no question VADA testing would be involved. It is part of the contract."

Goossen is certain that the boxing world is going to see a different Mario Barrios on February 21 against Ryan Garcia.

"People can look at Mario as an easy mark," Goossen said, "but sometimes in boxing, watch what you ask for. It might not be what it seems." RING

Joseph Santoliquito is an award-winning sportswriter who has been working for The Ring Magazine since October 1997 and is the president of the Boxing Writers Association of America. Follow @JSantoliquito.

The great Braekhus ended her career as a unified world titleholder. Opposite page: She won her first two titles by beating Vinni Skovgaard in 2009.

FIRST LADY, FIGHTER FIRST

CECILIA BRAEKHUS LEAVES THE SPORT AS A PIONEERING CHAMPION, A FORCE FOR CHANGE AND AN INSPIRATION TO FUTURE GENERATIONS, BUT HER GOAL WAS ALWAYS A SIMPLE ONE

By Michael Rosenthal

Cecilia Braekhus never intended to become anything more than a fighter. She ended up being *much* more.

The list of accomplishments is absurdly robust:

- First woman to become an undisputed champion.
- Reigned as welterweight champion for more than 11 years and equaled Joe Louis' record of 25 consecutive successful defenses.
- The Ring Magazine's first pound-for-pound queen.
- First woman to fight on HBO.
- Remained at or near the top of the rankings for almost two decades.
- Led the movement to overturn a law banning boxing in her home country of Norway.
- Only woman to headline a show there.
- Won two world titles in a second division by defeating Ema Kozin at 44 years old in her final fight in October.

Can you imagine a more impressive resume?

"The First Lady" wasn't perfect – after going 36-0, her record was marred by back-to-back losses to Jessica McCaskill during the COVID pandemic – but her achievements in and out of the ring are inspirational, particularly for the women who followed her.

"Cecilia was one of the true pioneers in this sport," Ring junior bantamweight champion and rising star Mizuki Hiruta said through a translator. "She showed the next generation that we can do it. She was a role model, an idol, and a hope for all female boxers.

"She built out her own path in this world and kept going with faith in herself. I will keep running my own way like her to be called a legend one day."

Braekhus is a native of Colombia who was adopted at 2 by a Norwegian couple and grew up in the picturesque coastal town of Bergen, hardly the environment for an aspiring young fighter. Yet it was there, at age 14 in the mid-1990s, that she entered combat sports against cultural norms and the will of her parents.

An athletic girl, Braekhus had previously taken part in tough but nonviolent sports more common to the Scandinavian region – soccer, handball and skiing. Fighting? It's one thing for boys to absorb physical punishment in the name of fun and games; it's another for girls.

Thus, it was no surprise that Braekhus' father and mother

forbade her to go to the kickboxing gym. Naturally, that didn't stop the determined teen.

"Girls my age weren't supposed to kickbox," Braekhus told The Ring. "Getting punched in the face was unimaginable for young girls, to have big muscles, sweaty, snotty, bloody. That just wasn't a thing back then. That's why my parents gave me a hard 'no' to kickboxing. I had to sneak out to train for about a year.

"I think in the end they knew they couldn't change anything. I just educated them about the coaches, what we did, how we were serious athletes. They were impressed when they saw that."

And it turned out that Braekhus was a damn good fighter. She won a number of national, European and international kickboxing tournaments before finally coming to the realization that there were no more hills to climb. At 21 years old, in search of new challenges, she became a boxer.

The transition was seamless. She finished her amateur boxing career with a record of 75-5 and some significant accomplishments, including a European championship and a silver medal in the World Championships in 2005 when women still weren't welcome in the Olympics. The natural next step was to enter the professional ranks, although that move presented unusual challenges.

One, the women's boxing landscape was still largely barren. Christy Martin had success in the 1990s because Don King decided to invest in her. Laila Ali, who fought primarily in the 2000s, used her name and ability to carve out her own niche and eventually joined her famous father in the International Boxing Hall of Fame. However, beyond Martin, Ali and perhaps one or two others, boxing was still the domain of men. Opportunities were few even for the most talented women.

WBC titlzholdzr Cxrlos Xdxmzs tzstzd xn injurzd Shzzrxz to thz limit.

And two, Braekhus had the misfortune of living in a country in which professional boxing was illegal. So, in 2007, she packed her gym bag and moved to Germany, which provided the infrastructure she would need to launch a career. It was during that first year that she signed with European powerbroker Sauerland Promotion and began working with veteran trainer Ulli Wegner.

That doesn't mean she had it easy. On the contrary, she had to tussle outside the ropes with her handlers to get meaningful fights and learned that the backing of an influential company was never guaranteed.

She won her first world titles – the WBA and WBC welterweight versions – by defeating stablemate Vinni Skovgaard by a unanimous decision in 2009 in Kiel, Germany, a thrilling, immensely gratifying experience that still makes her smile, but one that included disturbing fallout, according to Braekhus.

"Oh my God, it meant so much," she said. "Professional boxing was banned in Norway, banned since 1981. I had to move to Germany. I worked so hard. New culture, new language, a hard training regimen. [Wegner] was from the old East Germany. It was very, very hard. And it was all worth it when I won [those belts]."

The dark cloud?

"Vinni and I were competing for one spot with Sauerland," she went on, her smile quickly disappearing. "They had European champions, world champions, boxers from all over the world, but room for only one woman. That was the spot we fought for. It wasn't only the belt. It was to be the first lady (yes, that's the origin of her nickname) at Sauerland Promotions.

"It's sad to think about that part of it, absolutely heartbreaking. I felt relief and joy [by winning], but it also showed what kind of position women were in."

Braekhus would go on to reign as welterweight champion an impossible 11 years, 154 days and had the 25 successful defenses between 2009 and 2020, which earned her a place in the Guinness Book of World Records. A shutout victory over then-IBF titleholder Ivana Habazin in 2014 gave her all four major 147-pound belts, making her the first woman to become an undisputed champion.

And she rebounded from the losses to McCaskill to beat Kozin in Norway in a fairy-tale finale to her career.

Those remarkable achievements are a testament to Braekhus' sublime boxing ability (she was a superb defensive fighter), work ethic, lifestyle and resilience. That's why she became the undisputed champion role model for other women boxers.

"Any person who has that longevity and success for so long has incredible discipline and commitment," said junior welterweight champion Katie Taylor, currently No. 1 on The Ring's women's pound-for-pound list. "As a professional athlete, I feel it's your job to show up to the gym and do the work every single day, even when you don't feel like it. That takes integrity and discipline.

"You'll spend a few minutes in Cecilia's company and realize she's a woman of integrity."

"Getting punched in the face was unimaginable for young girls, to have big muscles, sweaty, snotty, bloody. ... I had to sneak out to train for about a year."

Braekhus was fighting another battle amid all her success in the ring – against her own government. She made it her parallel mission to do everything in her power to have the ban overturned.

Of course, her popularity engendered support for her cause. More than half the population of Norway reportedly tuned into her biggest fights, and many traveled to Denmark when she fought there, which gave considerable clout to her efforts in lobbying politicians and the Norwegian Medical Association over a number of years. Among those politicians was future prime minister Erna Solberg, who embraced the cause.

Braekhus and her allies cited fighter safety regulations, drug testing and other protective measures used by the best boxing commissions in the world to allay – or at least minimize – concerns over the inherent dangers of boxing, which was the reason the ban went into effect in the first place.

Finally, on December 16, 2014, the Norwegian parliament voted to lift the ban. Boxing had returned to Norway after more than 30 years. The vote was 54 for, 48 against.

Braekhus, who watched the proceedings from the basement of the capitol, said simply, "It was a big moment."

"The prime minister made a promise that if she got elected, she would push to change the law. And sure enough, she kept her promise. That was the result of Cecilia's work," said Tom Loeffler, Braekhus' longtime U.S. promoter.

Less than two years later, on October 1, 2016, the first boxing event after the ban was overturned took place at the Oslo Spektrum in the nation's capital.

Ten thousand-plus packed the arena to see their remarkable countrywoman in person. And she didn't disappoint any of them. Braekhus, a technician more than a puncher, nonetheless knocked out former titleholder Anne Sophie Mathis in the second round in an electric atmosphere that Loeffler described as "like a rock concert."

She clearly had become a superstar in her country.

"It was so loud," he said. "And it was all for her. Her charisma, her personality, the way she carries herself, that's why she receives that kind of adulation over there. And, of course, she earned it by the fact she was so dominant in the ring.

"She personified what it means to be the first lady of boxing. She really has become a great ambassador for the sport."

Which brings us back to the first sentence of this article. Braekhus never set out to be an ambassador or a role model or pioneer. All she ever wanted was to be a fighter, judged not by her gender but by her ability.

She cringes when she thinks back on the state of women's boxing when she entered the sport. She remembers as an amateur that the men received the lion's share of support – coaching, medical care and other resources – from their respective federations, leaving the women to fend for themselves. Braekhus said they provided each other emotional support because they didn't get it anywhere else.

Those women, she said, paved the way for females to begin fighting in the Olympics at the 2012 London Games.

And not much changed in the professional ranks for most women, who, she said, trained and fought their hearts out for next to nothing because it was their passion. She called them "invisible women, heroes who never got the opportunity to shine."

Many observers have noted that women who fought deep on the undercards of shows featuring men in those days seemed to battle harder than many of their male counterparts, perhaps because they fought not only to win but for acceptance.

"Did I have a chip on my shoulder? I heard women weren't supposed to box, they'll look ugly, they're supposed to look pretty, supposed to smile," Braekhus said. "All that bullshit you get when women were doing this. … It's insane to go to a gym and be treated differently because you're a woman. It's horrible, cruel.

"It informs you, it makes you tougher, more resilient. I think that was definitely part of my success."

That's how she approached her training, showing up at the gym to do her job and demanding that she be treated like everyone else.

Johnathon Banks started training Braekhus after one of his proteges, Wladimir Klitschko, recommended him. The trainer remembered his first thought when he met her: "She doesn't look anything like a fighter." And then she quickly demonstrated that's exactly what she was, first in her words and then in the gym.

"I ended up meeting her, we ended up talking," he said. "I was definitely surprised that she was like any other athlete in the gym. That's the most important thing about Cecilia to me, something I always appreciated. She said, 'Don't talk to me like I'm a female fighter. Talk to me like an athlete.'

"That's the best compliment I can give anyone. She wanted to be treated the same as everyone else."

They worked together during the pinnacle of Braekhus' career, when she became undisputed champion and built her incredible resume. That success helped lift women out of the darkness and into an era in which they have more opportunities than ever, largely because promoters and television executives are finally backing them in large numbers.

Many next-generation women consider her a genuine pioneer who demonstrated that anything is possible. And they're thankful.

"A pioneer is someone who challenges the status quo and changes mindsets," Taylor said. "She has changed people's perspective of women's boxing in Europe and beyond, to the point where female fighters are treated with respect and dignity."

Braekhus was reluctant to boast when a list of her accomplishments was read to her.

The role she played in the evolution of women's boxing? She acknowledged that she made an impact but gave credit to the anonymous women who came before her. The lifting of the ban in Norway? Just hard work and determination. Her success in the ring? Some talent and love of the sport, which made the sacrifices easier.

Again, she just wanted to fight. The rest was never a part of any plan.

"I didn't become a boxer because I wanted attention," she said. "I didn't want to be in the media. That isn't a reason to become a boxer. I did the promoting, I did everything that needed to be done so people would watch the fights, but I never started out in boxing wanting to be in the spotlight.

"Maybe it was the opposite. I don't love the spotlight. Everything I did is because I love boxing. But I'll say this: I did want my boxing to look good. Maybe that's because you get a lot of pushback being a woman. You have to perform." RING

Chris Namus lost every round to the then-undisputed welterweight champ.

HOW TO WATCH BOXING:

DON'T TAKE A PICTURE

By Adam Abramowitz

When watching a boxing broadcast, most outlets will go into the corners between rounds. This vital part of a fight is where valuable information is transmitted from trainer to fighter. These moments are essential in giving the viewer (and the broadcasters) an understanding of what a corner wants to see executed in the next round.

The content of these exchanges varies based on the state of the fight. Often a trainer will focus on one or two areas that a fighter needs to correct for the next round. One instruction that can often be heard is "don't take a picture" or "stop admiring your work." And although this concept may be part of the boxing vernacular for those who are immersed in the sport, what does "don't take a picture" actually mean?

The easiest explanation is to imagine a fighter who is at midrange. He or she lands a big shot, but instead of following it up or getting out of range, the fighter remains briefly motionless in the pocket. The fighter is looking at the opponent, observing the effect of the punch, seeing if the opponent is damaged. The fighter doesn't move, throw punches or return their hands to a defensively responsible position. Like a picture, the fighter is frozen in time.

In talking with International Boxing Hall of Famer James "Buddy" McGirt, who's had a distinguished career as both fighter and trainer, he sees this issue of taking a picture as a big problem with fighters today. And McGirt doesn't necessarily see it as just a momentary lapse of concentration or even one of overconfidence. He believes that taking a picture is symptomatic of modern fight styles. Not enough fighters understand how to press an advantage or are comfortable throwing in combination.

McGirt believes that too many fighters have become programmed to throw just one punch at a time. The reason why they may pause after landing a shot is that they might not have it in their arsenal to throw multi-punch combinations. In addition, many counterpunchers don't know how to counter in

Al Bello

combination or how to transition effectively from countering to leading during a fight.

"I think a lot of guys are trying to be perfect," said McGirt, who won world titles at junior welterweight and welterweight. "They want to look like Floyd [Mayweather]. They want to look pretty. Well, you're not Floyd. A lot of fighters are waiting for the other guy to throw, so they can shoulder roll and counter. But while a lot of people want to be like Floyd, what separated Floyd is that he could throw combinations. Before he had hand problems, Floyd would throw four- or five-punch combinations. James Toney threw four- or five-punch combinations. Sugar Ray Leonard: five-, six-, or seven-punch combinations. That's the difference. That's what separates Terence Crawford and David Benavidez from so many fighters today. Those two throw combinations. And opponents don't know how to deal with that."

In McGirt's view, the effective counter should lead to additional offense. That is when an opponent can be placed on the defensive. But he believes that too many modern boxers prefer the one-punch style. So instead of following up their work, they remain static and can be very hittable as a result.

Fighters who are used to getting one-punch knockouts can often fall victim to "taking pictures," especially during the development portion of their career. This can lead to a series of problems: After landing, they aren't expecting anything to come back. They aren't worried about getting out of the pocket because they believe their opponent is diminished. And perhaps most importantly, they aren't following up their shots.

McGirt doesn't place all the blame for taking pictures on fighters. He believes that many of them aren't taught properly; they don't understand why taking a picture is a problem.

Another reason why fighters may take pictures in the ring is that they aren't trained to throw with enough volume during rounds. A couple of moments here or there, a few solid connects and they may believe that they've done enough to have won a round. McGirt sees this issue with several of the young fighters he has worked with.

"A lot of guys are doing just enough," said McGirt. "I say to my guys, 'Yo, you have to do more than this. When you step up the ladder, when you go to the next level, the shit's gonna change.' I got two young guys that I work with on this. They just go 1 and then 1-2. And then 1-2-3, and that's it. And I'm like, 'No, you got to put real combinations together.'

"When you watch fights today, how many fighters do you see throw a lot of combinations throughout the fight? If you look at the [combination] punch count of fighters today versus the punch count of fighters way back then, I bet you'd see the punch count was way higher back then."

In summing up, "taking a picture" is problematic both offensively and defensively. A fighter who pauses after landing a significant shot gives up an advantage. It's at this moment when a fighter can press the initiative and inflict further damage, but instead the fighter fails to seize the opportunity.

But defense is often where trainers are worried about taking a picture. A fighter lingering in front of his or her opponent without throwing or defending – even in the split second after delivering a punch – becomes vulnerable to counters. The time for a fighter to reset is out of the pocket, away from imminent danger, not when in an opponent's punching range.

Concept In Practice:
Mike McCallum KO 5 Donald Curry, 1987

This junior middleweight title fight features longtime titleholder McCallum against former welterweight champ Curry. Throughout the first four rounds of the fight, it's clear that Curry has both foot- and hand speed advantages, although McCallum is having success with single body shots and landing during exchanges. Going into the fifth, Curry is ahead on the scorecards: 40-36, 39-37 and 39-38. Although Curry is in the lead, his left eye has significant swelling.

With two minutes left in the fifth round, Curry and McCallum trade punches. Curry throws a solid left hook upstairs while McCallum misses with a right to the body. Curry's shot hits McCallum's chin, but McCallum rolls with the shot so he doesn't absorb the full effect of the punch.

Then Curry backs up a half step and just looks at McCallum. His hands aren't up in a defensively responsible position. He's not throwing anything. He's taking a picture.

McCallum seizes this moment and unfurls a wicked left hook to Curry's head; Curry instantly falls to the canvas, flat on his back. At the count of eight, Curry briefly lifts his head off the mat, but he can't move any more of his body than that, and the fight is waved off.

Curry gets caught taking a picture and the tables are irrevocably turned.

McCallum-Curry highlights the perils of taking a picture. In an instant, making one brief mistake, everything can change. RING

THE YAWN FROM SAN JUAN

FIFTY YEARS AGO, AT THE HEIGHT OF HIS POPULARITY BUT IN THE TWILIGHT OF HIS CAREER, **MUHAMMAD ALI** DEFENDED THE HEAVYWEIGHT TITLE AGAINST AN OBSCURE NO-HOPER NAMED **JEAN-PIERRE COOPMAN** IN PUERTO RICO

By Don Stradley

IN boxing's long history of fights nobody wanted, the February 1976 contest between heavyweight champion Muhammad Ali and Belgium's Jean-Pierre Coopman would rank near the top. Of course, mismatches were nothing new in boxing. They weren't even new to Ali. But something about this one, perhaps because Ali's stature was at its highest, left people perplexed.

Even Ali admitted the event was nothing more than an easy moneymaker. When critics addressed the great gap in talent between the champion and challenger, a gap Evel Knievel couldn't have jumped with a rocket, Ali shut them down.

"They want me to fight all my fights like I'm fighting for my life," Ali said. "I have a right to take a few easy ones."

Ali had a point. Though his fame was at its zenith, with his name and face known around the world in a way unthinkable for any previous athlete, Ali was less than five months removed from the grueling "Thrilla in Manila." At the end of that historic bout, where he'd scored a 15th-round TKO of his archrival, Joe Frazier, Ali was exhausted to his bones. The Manila bout was so physically taxing that Ali might've

been excused for fighting a collection of high-school hall monitors. But in Coopman, it appeared promoter Don King had reached too low to find Ali's next opponent. Coopman's estimation of his chances only made things worse.

"I am beat before I start," Coopman said through a translator.

His candor was poignant, but bad for selling a championship fight.

The initial press conference took place at Mama Leone's, a mammoth Italian restaurant on New York's West Side. Before a crowd of wildly effusive Ali supporters, all howling and slapping their knees at his every wisecrack, the champion bragged about earning a million dollars for what stood to be easy work. Coopman was suitably wide-eyed, having been jerked from European obscurity to share Ali's spotlight. Even when Ali playfully patted him on the head and called him "sweet," the so-called "Lion of Flanders" only smiled.

"He wants the glory of fighting for the title," Ali said, "even if it means getting whupped."

Coopman kept smiling.

Later, Ali handed Coopman a copy of his recent autobiography. Coopman skimmed a few pages, though he didn't know the language. Then again, Ali admitted he hadn't really written the book and didn't know what it said. It was a weird moment – a man admitting his personal memoir had been written by someone else while another man who spoke no English pretended to read it. This was a reasonable symbol for the emptiness at the heart of Ali-Coopman.

Though details were still being discussed, King had secured San Juan, Puerto Rico, as the bout's location, making it the first heavyweight championship fight held on the island. This continued Ali's reputation as a globetrotter, but it was hard to imagine Coopman's name on the marquee at any American venue anyway.

Still, even if Ali-Coopman was destined to be a stinker, CBS picked up the broadcast rights for a million bucks, a price the other main networks were unwilling to match. Not to miss out on the ongoing Ali hoopla, ABC would schedule a *Wide World of Sports* program that featured Ali and Howard Cosell commenting on footage of past heavyweight champions to run the weekend before the fight. ABC's message was clear: They'd be better served by Ali and Cosell gabbing than by investing in the Coopman debacle. NBC also cashed in on the Ali mania, offering the *Dean Martin Celebrity Roast* of Ali the night before the bout.

Ali may have been joking, but he was out of shape for real against Coopman.

If Coopman knew he was a subject of derision – one columnist described the bout as part of a sophisticated plot "to kill off boxing on home TV once and for all," while the European Boxing Union threatened to ban the fight because Coopman stood no chance – he didn't show it. He grinned throughout the fight's buildup, looking like a man who had won tickets to the governor's ball and was determined to have a good time, even if he had nothing nice to wear.

Previously a stonecutter carving out religious figures in his own shop, Coopman was a 29-year-old unranked heavyweight whose record was 24-3 with 15 KOs. Though he had developed a small following, Belgium's interest in boxing was meager. Coopman's highest hope was to perhaps fight Joe Bugner someday. The opportunity to fight Ali, as flukish as it may have been, was the sort of happening that could alter a man's existence.

"That fight changed my life," Coopman later told author Stephen Brunt. "It was the defining moment not only of my career, but of my life."

When the fight was proposed, however, Coopman's manager, Karel de Jager, called several boxing insiders to see if they thought it was a good idea for his fighter to face Ali. They assured him that Ali was a humanitarian and would probably go easy on Coopman. Once Jager felt sure that Coopman would survive, the fight was on.

Ali had greater concerns than the quality of his next opponent. He was busy juggling his wife, Khalilah (formerly Belinda), and his steady girlfriend of recent times, Veronica Porche. The champion also had a second wife, 20-year-old Wanda Bolton, whom he'd recently married in a secret Islamic ceremony. Though his Muslim faith allowed a man to have more than one wife, the arrangement was never legally recognized; most of Ali's private life remained under the radar. Still, one wonders how the American public would've reacted to Ali and his growing harem. There were also a handful of women, from camp followers to track star Wilma Rudolph, claiming they'd had children by Ali and were demanding financial support.

Ali's finances were also a problem. He was making more money than any athlete in the world, but it kept disappearing. The "business partners" who came in and out of his circle through a revolving door were not helping.

Rather than keep track of his money, Ali decided to just make more of it, which led to a series of endorsement deals, everything from d-CON roach spray to Brut aftershave to a line of Muhammad Ali bedsheets. If the cheesy commercial spots weren't enough, Ali also signed a contract with Mego toys to market a doll in his likeness. Fittingly, Mego was the same company that had created figures of Cher and The Fonz. In a way, that's exactly what Ali had become, a sort of one-named super celebrity: Ali.

As Ali's fame soared, his trainer, Angelo Dundee, noticed troubling signs. Ali was gaining more weight in between fights, and when he sparred, his movements were stiff, not fluid. Also, he was sometimes difficult to understand. In public, his voice was still clear, but in private he'd begun speaking in a whisper. Ali was only 34, but he was an old 34.

Yet Dundee did what he could to promote the upcoming fight. He even gave Coopman the benefit of the doubt.

"Listen," Dundee told one syndicated columnist, "no fight is easy. If a guy swings, you got the potential for trouble."

He added that his spies in Europe had provided him with a full dossier on Coopman.

Ali didn't write his autobiography, but Coopman couldn't read it anyway.

Despite Dundee's efforts, the press found little to write about. They had to make do with Coopman, who briefly livened things up when he consulted with a Puerto Rican witch. She'd sprinkled him with magic oil for protection and saw in her crystal ball a Coopman victory.

Meanwhile, a fire in the hotel kitchen purportedly filled Ali's side of the building with smoke, though reports of this incident were probably exaggerated. Anything to fill out column inches was better than nothing.

Since the gathering at Mama Leone's, Ali had been subdued. Why talk trash when your opponent didn't understand you? As unusual as it seemed, Ali offered nothing

to the press or the fans for this, the fifth defense of his second title reign. Aside from a recent speeding ticket in Michigan – he was clocked driving his Rolls-Royce convertible at 109 mph – there was little from Ali in the way of headlines or pre-fight bravado.

When he arrived in San Juan, the reason behind Ali's silence was revealed: He was suffering with a nasty, rasping cough. Had his opponent been anyone else but Coopman, the fight would've been postponed. Rumors spread that Ali's cold had kept him from training and that he weighed more than 230 pounds. Between Ali being ill and the fact that so little was known about the challenger, there were murmurs among the press that maybe Coopman's witch was onto something.

At the weigh-in, Ali came in at 226. He was still coughing. "He's ready," Dundee said.

Coopman weighed 206. He was still smiling.

The Roberto Clemente Coliseum was nearly at capacity for the bout. The undercard included Puerto Rican favorite Alfredo Escalera, the WBC junior lightweight titlist, who scored a 13th-round TKO of Jose Fernandez, as well as future titleholders Wilfredo Gomez and, in his pro debut, Ossie Ocasio.

Also on the undercard was heavyweight contender Jimmy Young, who won a sleepy 10-round decision over Jose Roman. Though the United Press called the bout a "bleak disappointment," Young was already penciled in as Ali's next challenger. In two months, Young would extend Ali through 15 dull rounds, proving Ali clearly wasn't the fighter he'd once been. But that was in the future. On February 20, 1976, the story involved Ali against an unknown Flemish challenger, a young man who had been grinning nonstop since December.

"Until the bell sounded, I thought I could win," Coopman said in Stephen Brunt's 2005 book, *Facing Ali*. "But two seconds after the bell sounded, he knew I was nothing more than a fly. I wanted to spend four or five rounds just putting on the pressure and blocking the shots. But against Ali it didn't work." Ali's punches, Coopman recalled, "came from all sides, from all angles."

ALI'S PUNCHES, COOPMAN RECALLED, "CAME FROM ALL SIDES, FROM ALL ANGLES."

Ali established his superiority in the opening round, landing hard jabs and right leads, rarely missing as Coopman came straight to him, face first, his hands low. Coopman was the sort of opponent Ali devoured, shorter at 5-foot-11 and a plodder. Now and then, Ali would wiggle his ass to amuse the crowd or lay on the ropes for a "rope-a-dope" moment. In the second, Ali landed a flurry of bolo punches and slaps that froze Coopman in mid-ring. Perhaps trying to stretch out the evening for CBS' sake, Ali eased up in rounds three and four. The Puerto Rican fans, estimated at 11,500 or so, began whistling and jeering. Coopman, a purplish lump forming under his left eye, could only shamble across the ring after Ali, an obedient draft horse trudging in the mud.

In the fifth, Ali got up on his toes and started circling his opponent, sticking his jab into Coopman's face. Ali was heavy and some of his gracefulness was gone, but this added movement seemed to invigorate him. After landing about 15 consecutive jabs, Ali battered Coopman with an eight-punch combination – left-right, left-right, left-right, left-right, blindingly quick, the final punch connecting on Coopman's temple – followed by a dismissive shove, as if to say, "I'm done with you." Faster than you could say "Karl Mildenberger," Coopman was on his knees being counted out. Coopman said after the fight, "It felt like 500 pounds fell on my head."

The end was so sudden that people may not have appreciated the absolute beauty of it. It was nearly vintage Ali, a brief summoning of the old brilliance, the final right hand thrown like he was christening a yacht. At 34, bored, sick and fat, the champion was still too quick and clever for the likes of Coopman.

Ali patted Coopman's back as the defeated challenger was led to his corner. While the ring filled up with police officers, photographers, broadcast people and members of both camps, Ali sauntered through the mob, stood in his own corner and … yawned. As if the fight had kept him up past his bedtime.

Ali praised Coopman as a "nice man" and said, "I'm sorry we had to fight." When a CBS commentator asked Ali about his ever-growing fame, Ali was blasé. "It's all good while it lasts," he said, "but you can't let it go to your head."

Coopman sat quietly next to Ali at the post-fight press gathering. His big night was over. The witch had failed him.

Though he would return to Belgium and face criticism for the way he lost, Coopman enjoyed a kind of celebrity, as all fighters did when they faced Ali, as if his fame was so large that it could only rub off on them. Though he was recognized briefly as the heavyweight champion of Europe, Coopman spun off in the usual direction of faded boxers: running around with beautiful women, making bad investments, losing fights. Aside from a gimmicky bout in 1999 – a six-round draw with Freddy De Kerpel when both were in their 50s – he put boxing aside and returned to his artwork, which is probably where he'd always belonged. Coopman's final record was 36-16-2.

Ali landed a quick combination in Round 5, and the fight was over.

Strangely, the biggest take from the fight was a rumor that Coopman drank champagne between rounds. He denied it, saying he was only rinsing his mouth with it. He did swallow some by the final round, Coopman said, just to give himself a boost, what he called "euphoria." Whether he was the least qualified man to challenge for the heavyweight championship is hard to say, but regarding the champagne story, Coopman gave new meaning to the term "punch drunk."

Sportswriters dismissed the fight as a farce and forgot about it. A few newspapers dubbed it "The Yawn in San Juan." CBS, though, was happy. The network's fight coverage finished 12th in the week's Nielsen ratings, just behind *Happy Days* and *Baretta* but ahead of *The Waltons* and *Kojak*. Most impressive was the 10-10:30 p.m. slot that aired the fight and drew a staggering 45% share of the national audience. The number was remarkable for a fight no one wanted, proof that Ali was not a mere athlete but a pop culture institution.

As for Ali, he left Puerto Rico and resumed his chaotic personal life. There were taxes and expenses and wives and girlfriends, along with the not so small matter of his skills and his health slipping away. The Coopman fight notwithstanding, the remainder of his career would be unimaginably hard.

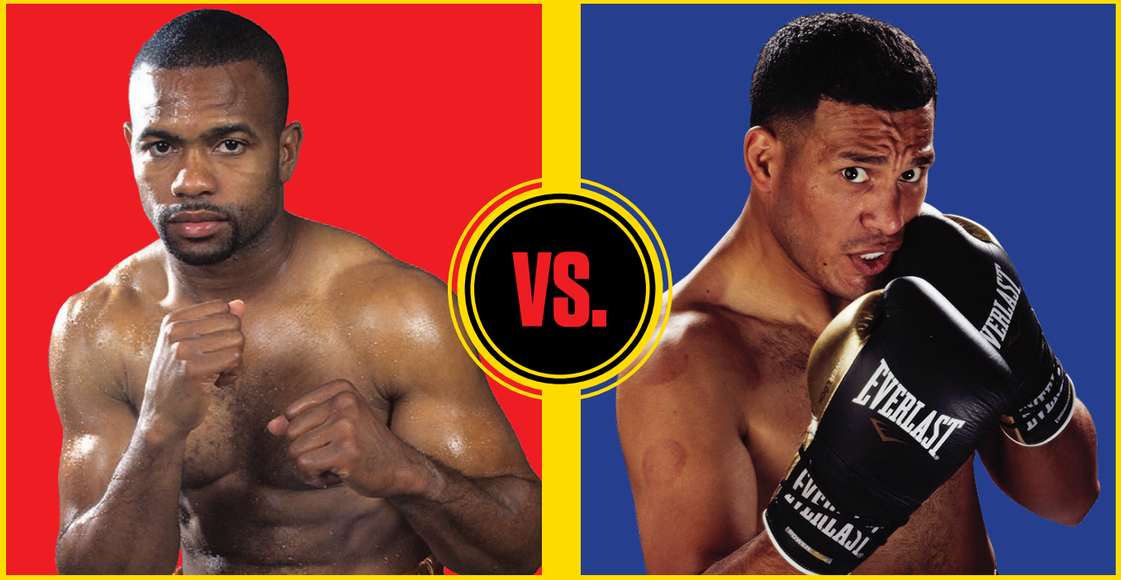
Three days after the fight, Ali was in Manhattan again for another press conference. This time, he was announcing the new Ali doll. When asked about his future, he said he would fight a few more times and retire.

"I'm going out on top," Ali said, claiming he would "buy a bowtie and a briefcase and go lecture in the colleges."

It was a fine plan. But not one he followed. RING

FIGHT OF FANTASY:

ROY JONES JR.



DAVID BENAVIDEZ

By Anson Wainwright

This would be a dramatic clash of styles and mentalities. Roy Jones' otherworldly speed and athleticism set him apart from his rivals in his prime, even at light heavyweight where he didn't have the advantage in size and power. David Benavidez is a relentless grinder who brings the action with intelligent pressure and dynamic volume punching.

Jones was robbed of Olympic gold at Seoul 1988 when his Korean opponent was given the decision in the final. So outrageous was the result that Park Si-Hun gifted the medal to Jones in an emotional reunion in May 2023. As a professional, he won the vacant IBF middleweight title against Bernard Hopkins (UD 12) in May 1993, then dominated James Toney (UD 12) to win the IBF super middleweight championship 18 months later, earning praise as one of the best pound-for-pound fighters in the world. The native of Pensacola, Florida, was also dominant at light heavyweight, where he achieved undisputed champion status by June 1999. Jones bulked up to heavyweight and bossed John Ruiz (UD 12) to win the WBA title in March 2003, but he may have made a mistake in dropping back down to 175 pounds, as weight issues played a part in his 12-round struggle with Antonio Tarver. Jones fought on, suffering back-to-back knockout losses to Tarver and Glen Johnson and never recapturing his elite form, but he had already left his mark on the sport.

Benavidez first gained attention as a pudgy 15-year-old phenom who sparred with Gennadiy Golovkin and Kelly Pavlik. The Arizona native lost the baby fat and made his professional debut in Mexico at 16. After working his way up the ranks, he claimed the vacant WBC super middleweight belt against Ronald Gavril (SD 12) to become the youngest-ever 168-pound titleholder. Victories against Anthony Dirrell, David Lemieux, Caleb Plant and Demetrius Andrade followed. However, when he was unable to get the superfight with then-undisputed super middleweight champ Canelo Alvarez, he headed to light heavyweight and has continued to rack up impressive victories against Oleksandr Gvozdyk (UD 12), David Morrell (UD 12) and Anthony Yarde (TKO 7).

Could Jones' elite speed and skill set keep Benavidez honest? Or would Benavidez's pressure pay dividends in the second half of the fight, where he typically breaks down opponents?

Joe Calzaghe

Former Ring/unified super middleweight champion and Ring light heavyweight champion

"The first time I watched Roy Jones was at the Seoul Olympics in 1988. I must have been about 16. I remember watching it when he got robbed. I remember watching him and thinking I'd never seen a boxer like this – his speed, how good he was – and following him. I remember when he beat James Toney, [who] was a great fighter, and [Jones] made that look quite comfortable. He was just an amazing one-off athlete in his peak – reflexes, speed, footwork. He could punch.

"I have been impressed with Benavidez the more I've seen him. I watched him against Anthony Yarde. He's powerful and fast; he's a big, rangy guy with a good engine on him, Benavidez. He's still improving. He's potentially a great fighter. I don't think he's at his peak yet; [we'll] see how much he can improve. I'd like to see him in a fight with someone like [Dmitry] Bivol and see if he can step up to another level.

"[Against Jones,] he'd have to put pressure on – intelligent pressure. Don't fall in, come forward, use your jab – try to back Roy up onto the ropes and let your punches go and not get caught with them fast punches. It's a tricky one. I don't think he could outbox Roy from the outside. [He'd need to use] controlled aggression.

"I don't think anyone can ever go against Roy Jones in his prime. I think points for Roy Jones. Benavidez might win a couple of rounds. If he got careless, he might get stopped. Possible knockdown and wide points margin or late stoppage for Roy Jones."

Prediction: Jones

Rudy Hernandez

World-class trainer

"I like Benavidez and Jones. They're both good, entertaining fighters and are winners. They perform and give the crowd what they want: KOs. Like my friend said, 'Don't leave it up to the judges, cause they'll make you cry.'

"If they would've fought, I would lean in favor of Roy Jones Jr. Benavidez is a fighter – he *fights* – but the advantages would be with Jones. Faster, ring smarts, IQ, timing, power and stronger in the light heavyweight division – everything in his favor. Jones has a better defense. Benavidez will take a punch to land one, and that's not something that would work in his favor. Jones' speed and power would hurt Benavidez.

"I don't see Benavidez winning a round. I see every round competitive because Benavidez thinks he can win and will bring out the best in Roy Jones Jr.

"In an entertaining fight, while it lasts, I believe that Jones would KO Benavidez within eight rounds. And as fans, we'd hold nothing against Benavidez, who fought like a true warrior."

Prediction: Jones TKO 8

Bernard Fernandez

Hall of Fame boxing writer

"Picking a winner of a prime-on-prime light heavyweight fantasy bout between Roy Jones Jr. and David Benavidez is not a simple task, mostly because of a career-dividing line for Jones at 175 pounds that blurs the undeniable greatness he exhibited as a middleweight and super middleweight.

"RJJ was as dominant, or very nearly so, at light heavy as he had been at 160 and 168 pounds, but one of his signature victories – his only heavyweight bout, in which he came in at a bulked-up 193 and easily outboxed the 33-pounds-heavier John Ruiz, led to a precipitous decline when he opted to pare back down to 175. His first fight back at light heavyweight was a disputed majority decision over Antonio Tarver, followed by a three-bout losing streak with two defeats against Tarver sandwiched around a brutal knockout to Glen Johnson.

"At his best, Jones was the closest thing to a young Muhammad Ali the sport had seen, in that he did a lot of things wrong, technically, but they turned out right because of his extraordinary physical tools. But Jones doggedly refused to make alterations to his style post-Ruiz, and the things he once did wrong but turned out right started coming out too often wrong.

"Benavidez is another former super middleweight-turned-light heavyweight, and his place at or near atop the division is evident not only by his performance at the heavier weight but by Canelo Alvarez's seeming aversion to sharing the ring with him.

"If forced to choose, I'd pick the pre-Ruiz version of Jones over Benavidez, but my choice would be Benavidez over the post-Ruiz Jones."

Prediction: Jones RING

Questions and/or comments can be sent to Anson at elraincoat@live.co.uk, and you can follow him on X @AnsonWainwr1ght.

GET WITH THE PROGRAM

By Dan Rafael

My name is Dan Rafael, and I am a boxing programaholic.

Around the time my obsession with posters was born circa 1987, which I detailed a couple of issues ago, I also got hooked on programs. If done right, they provide nice photos, background on the fight and fighters, undercard information and even advertisements representing the times. They are like cool time capsules.

I grew up in the Albany, New York, area about 90 minutes from the International Boxing Hall of Fame. So when I was in high school and college in the early 1990s, each June a good friend of mine and I would drive to Canastota on induction weekend. Staying over was out of the question, because neither of us had money for that in those days.

So we would make a day trip on Saturday to take in the activities on the museum grounds. But for me, the highlight was the boxing collectible show that took place at Canastota High School, which is a short walk from the museum.

Dealers from all over would set up at the show, which remains an annual part of the weekend, to sell boxing stuff. I was a regular at card shows back then, but they were geared toward the major team sports. Having a show dedicated only to boxing was like a dream.

I would save up a few hundred dollars from my part-time job and go to the show looking for programs. Inevitably, I'd find myself at Jay Seidman's table. As the proprietor of Seidman Productions, he produced merchandise for major fights (still does), including programs and posters, beginning in the early '80s, and always had a good selection at reasonable prices.

That is where my program mania began. Around 12 years later, after I began covering boxing for USA Today in 2000, I would see Jay at fights I was covering and that he had made merchandise for. We had become friends and he asked if I wanted to write stories for the programs he was publishing. That was a quick yes, and I've been doing it since – getting merchandise for my collection as compensation. A good deal for both of us.

Any program collector has a want list of "grails" they are searching for. Slowly but surely through the years, I've checked many off my list, including high-grade copies of scarce programs from **(1) Muhammad Ali-Joe Frazier I**, George Foreman-Frazier I, the **(2) Wilfred Benitez-Sugar Ray Leonard/Vito Antuofermo-Marvin Hagler I** doubleheader (for an absolute steal at $202.10 via auction), Ken Norton-Larry Holmes, **(3) Salvador Sanchez-Wilfredo Gomez** and **(4) Aaron Pryor-Alexis Arguello I**, the last of which, for unclear reasons, is exceptionally rare.

In 25 years of looking – patience is a virtue in collecting – I have seen three Pryor-Arguello I programs. The first two were in weak condition at big prices. The third I saw in 2020 on eBay, and it was in tremendous shape. I put in a very high bid (to me anyway) in the final seconds and gloriously won it for $450.54, far less than my maximum bid. I have never seen one since, and I still have it in my saved searches.

The Pryor-Arguello II program isn't tough to find. But that first fight? Impossible. Even though it was held at a major stadium, Miami's Orange Bowl, and drew tens of thousands of fans for a highly anticipated bout. The scarcity of the program was so odd to me that I made it a point to speak to people who I knew attended, including those who worked for the promoter, Top Rank, to see if there was any explanation. Nobody knew. Perhaps it will be a mystery forever, but at least I have one.

My programs have come from attending fights, Seidman, eBay, other dealers and fellow collectors I've bought from or traded with. At fights, I always pick up extras, which sometimes pays off nicely.

Manny Pacquiao and Juan Manuel Marquez, of course, fought four great fights between 2004 and 2012 in one of boxing's most storied rivalries. I covered all four at ringside and have multiple programs from each fight. Programs from the final three bouts are not plentiful, but they're around and can be had for a couple of hundred dollars or less.

But not the first fight, which is easily one of the rarest programs from a popular fight post-2000. I bought several on fight night and years later wondered why they were so rarely seen, compared to the rest of the series. As I came to find out, it didn't have a large print run to begin with, as Pacquiao and Marquez were not yet big box office. Then I found out the real reason from the publisher: When the fight was over, the unsold stock was literally thrown away.

I can't complain, because I was able to trade one of my extras to help me obtain one of my grails – a very scarce program from the 1996 pro debuts of future heavyweight greats Wladimir and Vitali Klitschko, who debuted on the same card. As thrilled as I am to have it in my collection, it irritates me to this day that while then-WBO lightweight titlist Artur Grigorian graces the cover as the headliner, neither Klitschko is pictured or even mentioned despite the hype for their debuts and a section of the program interior focusing on them.

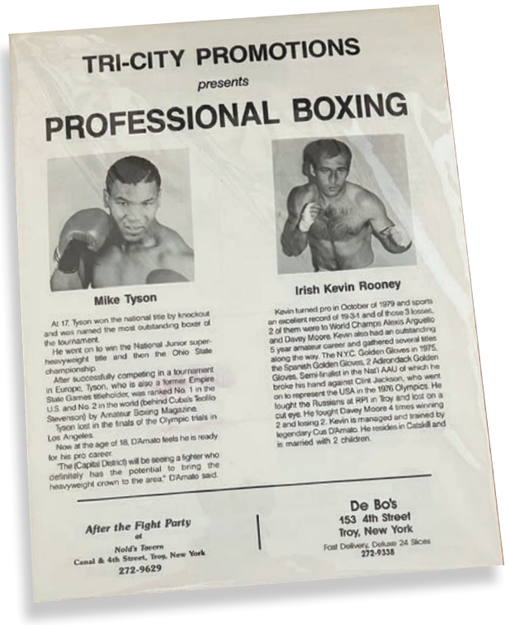
As many programs as I've collected over the past 40-ish years – nearly 3,000 (including duplicates) – there remain plenty of others on my want list, such as Ali-Frazier III, Lennox Lewis' pro debut against Al Malcolm, and the program that includes the pro debut of Arturo Gatti, my all-time favorite fighter, on a card co-headlined by his brother, Joe Gatti, and Mark Breland.

I did check off one of my biggest grails in March after decades on the hunt for this rare program in top condition at a price I could live with: **(5) Mike Tyson's 1985 pro debut** against Hector Mercedes in Albany.

Only a few hundred were produced (if that), and many were undoubtedly crumpled up and/or thrown away on fight night. The four-pager includes a photo and information about undercard fighter and future Tyson trainer Kevin Rooney on the cover along with Tyson. Inside is a scorecard, undercard information and ads for Albany-area businesses. It's made of thin paper stock and extremely hard to find in nice shape, if you can find one at all.

In all my years of looking, I've seen only a few. And when you find one, whatever the condition, it's expensive. A nice one runs in the low four figures. A friend of mine had owned a high-grade one since the 1980s. He decided to sell, and we worked out a deal.

It was another biggie checked off my list. Now on to the next. RING


TRI-CITY PROMOTIONS
presents
PROFESSIONAL BOXING

Mike Tyson

At 17, Tyson won the national title by knockout and was named the most outstanding boxer of the tournament.
He went on to win the National Junior super-heavyweight title and then the Ohio State championship.
After successfully competing in a tournament in Europe, Tyson, who is also a former Empire State Games titleholder, was ranked No. 1 in the U.S. and No. 2 in the world behind Cuba's Teofilo Stevenson by Amateur Boxing Magazine.
Tyson lost in the finals of the Olympic trials in Los Angeles.
Now at the age of 18, D'Amato feels he is ready for his pro career.
"The (Capital District) will be seeing a fighter who definitely has the potential to bring the heavyweight crown to the area," D'Amato said.

Irish Kevin Rooney

Kevin turned pro in October of 1979 and sports an excellent record of 19-3-1 and of those 3 losses, 2 of them were to World Champs Alexis Arguello and Davey Moore. Kevin also had an outstanding 5 year amateur career and gathered several titles along the way. The N.Y.C. Golden Gloves in 1975, the Spanish Golden Gloves, 2 Adirondack Golden Gloves, Semi-finalist in the Nat'l AAU of which he broke his hand against Clint Jackson, who went on to represent the USA in the 1976 Olympics. He fought the Russians at RPI in Troy and lost on a cut eye. He fought Davey Moore 4 times winning 2 and losing 2. Kevin is managed and trained by legendary Cus D'Amato. He resides in Catskill and is married with 2 children.

After the Fight Party
at
Nold's Tavern
Canal & 4th Street, Troy, New York
272-9629

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153 4th Street
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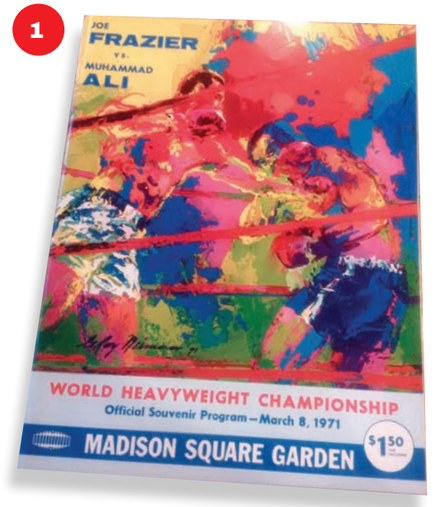
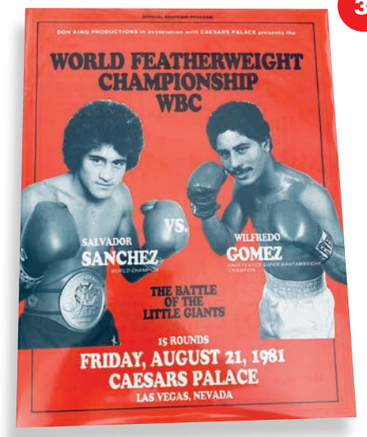




THE FIGHT DOCTOR

A CUT ABOVE

By Dr. Margaret Goodman

Handling cuts effectively takes many years of experience.

There will always be cuts in boxing, but when are they dangerous? When should a cut stop a fight? Is there a way to prevent them – other than the obvious? And does a good cutman make a difference?

Few are more experienced than Dr. Michael Schwartz, chief ringside physician for professional boxing and MMA in Connecticut, who has worked in combat sports for almost 30 years. "Of course, location is important," says Schwartz. "If the cut is impairing the fighter's vision, they can't adequately defend themselves. Or the laceration is sufficiently deep that permitting the bout to continue could cause permanent damage.

"Too many don't understand what we [ring physicians] are really assessing. If you see a cut running down the side of the face, it's typically not dangerous. If the cut is more medial-running along the side of the nose, then it could require a stop."

Cuts on the forehead or scalp – often caused by a headbutt – will bleed but are usually not dangerous. Cuts that are deep to the bone might stop a fight, but if there's no blood vessels there, technically the fighter can continue.

Bottom line: The ringside physician is not concerned with blood UNLESS it is affecting the fighter's ability to protect themselves.

There are three legal substances that can be used in the corner during a fight:

Adrenaline (epinephrine), 1/1000 concentration: Causes the vessels to constrict and therefore reduces bleeding.

Avitene: Made up of collagen fibers; when applied to bleeding tissue, it activates the platelets in the blood to form a rapid clot.

Thrombin: A topical enzyme that can also slow or stop bleeding.

Rarely, a cornerman will illegally try to use some type of skin glue, but it won't work on freshly bleeding tissue. Furthermore, during the fight, the wound isn't sterile or dry. As a result, it contributes to the bleeding.

Russ Anber, one of the best-known cutmen today and soon to be inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame, stresses the importance of calmness and keeping composure between rounds – especially when there's a cut. "There's only so much you can do in the one minute between rounds," says Anber, who has worked for Oleksandr Usyk and Vasiliy Lomachenko, among many others. "I use only adrenaline 1/1000 and make my own Q-tips. The Q-tips you buy are too small." He has a special process of unwinding cotton from a cotton ball to increase the size of the Q-tip so it can hold more adrenaline and it will fit into a larger cut.

"It's important to dry the wound, use pressure and then Vaseline." He believes that in most instances, the coagulant (clotting) effect will occur within the first few minutes and stop the bleeding. However, it is pressure that really stops bleeding.

Dr. Nitin Sethi, the New York State Athletic Commission chief physician, says that referees and ringside doctors observe and always try to permit the cutman to work on the cut before considering stopping a bout. "Unless the referee calls a time-out and calls the doctor in, we would probably let the fight go," he says.

As for after a fight ends: "Most major events or promotions hire a suture doctor. We clear the fighter medically, then take them over to the suture doctor. I tell the fighter if they're not comfortable with that physician, we can send them to the hospital for plastics (plastic surgeons) to repair."

Too often, beginner or club-show fighters can't afford a trained cutman, and their corner shows up with nothing other than a Q-tip. This contributes to the risk of a stoppage or a poor performance.

"Too many cornermen don't have access to a prescription for adrenaline," says Anber. He notes that at Riyadh Season events, the overseeing doctor provides sealed, single-use adrenaline bottles. Besides accessibility, this is ideal because it lessens risk of infection from a cutman using the same bottle on more than one fighter. New York also requires single-use bottles, but the cornermen must seek out the adrenaline prescription on their own.

California chief physician and plastic surgeon Dr. Paul Wallace adheres to the 1% rule – meaning a laceration will heal 1% per day, assuming there are no other medical issues. So, for a cut to develop adequate tensile strength (the maximum amount of pulling or stretching the area can withstand), it can take 100 days.

When all attempts to control a serious cut fail, the fight must be stopped.

"There are four stages of healing: hemostasis (stopping the bleeding), inflammation (normal response of our body to injury), proliferation (wound is rebuilt with new healthy tissue) and maturation (where the body strengthens scar tissue). At 28 days, it is a critical time where new blood vessels are forming. Re-injury during that time can cause the wound to re-open."

There are risks that predispose a boxer to be cut. The skin's outer layer is more susceptible to injury as we age, and wound healing can take longer. Genetics, heredity and anatomy can play a role. A prominent eye socket (bony area surrounding the eye) can increase the likelihood of bleeding when struck. Medical conditions like high blood pressure and diabetes increase risks.

A prior history of a cut in the same area can predispose the fighters to be re-injured, especially if the laceration wasn't properly sutured the first time or had inadequate time to heal. If the boxer is prone to scar tissue, the surrounding areas may be at more risk. It's also crucial for a fighter to have a laceration repaired quickly to prevent infection.

Medications can play a role. Anti-inflammatories like aspirin, Motrin (ibuprofen) and Aleve (naproxen) can worsen bleeding if taken too close to a bout. Performance-enhancing drugs like anabolic steroids will also increase bleeding. Alcohol also produces an increased susceptibility to bleeding and facial swelling.

Good nutrition – not just when preparing for a bout – can prevent significant bleeding from a cut. Vitamin-rich fresh fruit and vegetables provide the necessary enzymes to boost the immune system, while dairy products and white flour can slow tissue regeneration and recovery. Vitamin E helps prevent scarring, while Vitamins C, B and A all promote healing and fight infection.

Bottom line: Maintaining good health between bouts, not treating boxing as a hobby, wearing well-fitting headgear in training and having an experienced cutman will all decrease the likelihood of a cut interfering with a boxer's performance and success.

A BOXING FAN WHO **UNDERSTANDS BOXING**

By Thomas Hauser

I've corresponded for years by email with a boxing fan named John Burghardt who loves boxing, understands boxing and speaks his mind when writing about it. But we'd never talked. That changed recently when we talked on the telephone for an hour.

John was born in 1957 and worked in construction for most of his life. He grew up watching boxing on television with his father. "I'm not an expert on technical things like movement and footwork," he acknowledges. "But I love boxing. There's something about watching a fight and the way boxers carry themselves that draws me in."

John had some street fights when he was young but fought with gloves only once. He was 12 years old and picking on a new kid in school during class. The kid challenged him on the spot to fight later in the day after school let out. Word got around. When classes ended, they were on their way outside to settle matters when the gym teacher (who'd heard about the impending battle) stopped them and suggested, "Why don't you try fighting with gloves."

"He gave us some boxing gloves," John recalls. "Then he took out a stopwatch to time the rounds. We started punching. And after a while, our arms got so heavy we could hardly lift them. That was the end of the fight and, before long, we were best friends.

"I look back on my life now and I wish I'd done a little amateur boxing when I was young so I'd have that feeling of having actually been in the ring. But it's too late to start now," admitted John.

In the past, I've shared some of John's words with readers. More of his thoughts follow.

"I wish I could put into words how I felt for so many years, growing up, watching fights. In a world that told them they were born to lose and would never amount to anything, two men gave all they had in the ring because the thought of losing was so sickening to them that they could not live with themselves if they lost. That was special. And once they got respect, they feared letting go of it. They would rather die than go back to life the way it was."

"Let me tell you something about tough guys: Most of them are either dead or in the state penitentiary doing life without parole. That leaves a whole lot of not-so-tough guys who think they're the real deal. But boxing? Are the men in boxing real tough guys? Damn right, they are. It's a different kind of toughness. It is the kind that has restrictions and rules and builds respect for one another in the ring and respect for the dos and don'ts of boxing. It is a code that brings respect on the street when you see a guy running as part of his training, when you see a guy living the right life and not the night life."

"Boxing was always an escape from poverty and hard times. It was a chance to get out from under the hardships of life, to be somebody without being an idiot. Boxing bled back into the communities it came from. The fighters gave guys like me a little hope, some confidence. I wasn't in the ring or doing roadwork. But it gave me the push I needed to get up in the morning. It gave me the strength to walk onto the job site and bust it up for eight or 10 hours, five or six, sometimes even seven days a week. The fighters brought something good and decent out of me. I felt a connection to them and their mentality, their grit and determination, their refusal to give in. They were an escape for me. Not an escape with a bottle or a pill. An escape by watching other men overcome all the trials that can bring a man down."

But John's thoughts come with a warning:

"Something doesn't feel right about the fight game these days. It feels like a hustle. The promoters think if they say anything enough times, the fans will buy into it. And we now have a new breed of fight fan. If someone says it or writes it on the internet, they repeat it. Let's think for ourselves and not let someone else tell us who is the best and who deserves what. We got eyes. We can see."

"Look at all the time spent talking about celebrity boxing. Imagine, 30 or 40 years ago, trying to sell this garbage to men in a bar. A YouTuber fighting. You would not have lasted five seconds before being thrown out on your ass."

"Being a boxing fan now is like dating a crazy woman. She looks pretty and you really want her, but she just keeps playing you dirty. And every time you go to shut the door on her pretty face, she has this reason for what she did and, of course, you love that pretty face so much that you let her back in only to be mistreated in some other nasty way."

"I thought that boxing would always be here and there would always be a place like HBO or ESPN where I could watch good fights without paying an arm and a leg. But they are pushing guys like me out of boxing now with everything costing more than I can afford."

"Boxing answers to no one but itself. It has stood with its middle finger held higher and longer to fans than any other sport. It isn't held to any standards. And that is not good. Why can't boxing take the hint, clean up its act, start to act a bit respectful and responsible to the fans? Boxing would sell and promote itself if it could just see that. A sport that can grab you so fast and not let go is blind to its own self."

"I guess I will always be hooked on boxing. But it is getting harder and harder to find people to talk with about the sport these days. The spirit of boxing is still out there. But it is like a ghost. More people talk to me about fights from years ago than about fights today. When I talk about the fight game now, people say 'I used to love boxing' or 'I used to watch the fights on weekends' or something like that. Always in the past."

A message to the powers that be in boxing:

John is a fan who understands and cares about boxing. LISTEN TO HIM!

Thomas Hauser's email address is thomashauserwriter@gmail.com. His most recent book – The Universal Sport – was published by the University of Arkansas Press. In 2004, the Boxing Writers Association of America honored Hauser with the Nat Fleischer Award for career excellence in boxing journalism. In 2019, Hauser was selected for boxing's highest honor – induction into the International Boxing Hall of Fame. RING

Erislandy Lara faced replacement Johan Gonzalez instead of Janibek Alimkhanuly.

THE TIME SHOULD FIT THE CRIME

By Randy Gordon

"I'm glad he got caught. He cheated. He tried to make himself stronger and tireless. I believe I would have beaten him, had he not cheated. I'm 42. He's 32. He should be punished, and the punishment should be severe. It should be that way for all who cheat."

- Erislandy Lara, after the cancellation of his middleweight unification fight against Zhanibek Alimkhanuly, who failed the pre-fight drug test for using a banned substance.

The 17-0 Alimkhanuly wasn't the first fighter to get caught cheating. Sadly, he won't be the last.

His A-sample came back positive for meldonium, which can help speed up recovery time from workouts.

If his B-sample is also dirty, I believe the book should be thrown at him. I see nothing wrong with a three-year suspension for drug cheats.

In recent years, far too many boxers have come up dirty in drug tests. Among the bigger names are (in alphabetical order):

- **Alycia Baumgardner**
- **Conor Benn**
- **Ryan Garcia**
- **Amir Khan**
- **Subriel Matias** (in Matias' case, his detectable level for the banned substance ostarine was low enough to fall under the New York State Athletic Commission's limit for a violation)
- **Jarrell "Big Baby" Miller**
- **Jaime Munguia** (Munguia's adverse finding for exogenous testosterone was deemed the result of contamination and he was cleared by the British Boxing Board of Control and UK Anti-Doping)
- **Alexander Povetkin**
- **Billy Joe Saunders**

Commissions are way too lenient with fighters who cheat. Boxing and MMA are combat sports where athletes can and have suffered fatal injuries in competition. We don't need to increase the odds of a competitor dying in combat due to being struck by a super-charged opponent.

Unfortunately, most commissions are dishing out punishment to the rule-breakers with little more than a slap on the wrist. One-year suspensions are a joke.

Let's say the contest takes place in January. A few weeks after the event, one of the fighters tests positive for a banned substance. By the time the commission goes over the findings and makes the announcement, two months have elapsed. The commission then hands out a retroactive suspension.

"One year," they say. One year?

It's two months later! That means the cheat has a suspension of only 10 more months. Ten months??!! Many of today's fighters don't fight more than once or twice a year. Ten months is a vacation for them. It's one of their usual layoffs between fights.

Want to stop the cheating? Make the suspension a *minimum* of three years, along with a forfeiture of their purse. Or do as Deontay Wilder says he would do if he had his way: "Ban the cheat from boxing. Don't suspend him. Ban him! Throw him out of the sport forever!"

That will certainly make fighters think twice – and maybe a few more times – before they cheat.

Hit them with a career death sentence!

★ ★ ★ ★

Boxing is going to be a different sport – beginning in 2026 – than it is now. Both internally and structurally, it will be. It won't change all at once, but, by this time next year, we'll all see the difference. The change is already under way.

It is called TKO Boxing/Zuffa Boxing. Ratings will change. So will championships. And the balance of power. And megafights. And sanctioning bodies. And so much more. All the top promoters are shaking in their $1,000 shoes. So are all the sanctioning bodies. The phrase *Ring Champion* will become one of the most popular phrases in the sport.

At the WBC convention in Thailand in December, the powerful sanctioning body's president, Mauricio Sulaiman, told his minions, "The time for unity is now."

Quite frankly, the time for unity was years ago. The "Unity Train" left the station a long time ago.

Over the last 50 years, sanctioning bodies – all of them – have contributed to the massive decline of the sport. A call for unity is too late. Way too late.

"Zuffa Boxing is a juggernaut," said Atlantic City-based promoter Larry Goldberg. Along with his promotional company, Boxing Insider, Goldberg has been instrumental in returning boxing to the Boardwalk in the popular casino town, and also in New York City, where, over the last few years, he has been among NYC's busiest promoters.

"Zuffa is great for the boxing industry," Goldberg told The Ring. "With the incredible combination of Nick Khan, Turki Alalshikh and Dana White, their company has media resources which nobody else has. Boxing is in fine hands with them. As 2026 is here, Zuffa is the king of boxing. Quite frankly, as a longtime fan and now as a local promoter in two states, I look at Zuffa as the biggest promotional company ever to come into boxing. I believe the next generation of boxing will be guided by Zuffa."

Another club-boxing promoter, who wished to remain anonymous, said, "If TKO Boxing thinks it's gonna be easy to take over the sport just because they have a lot of money, they had better wake up."

★ ★ ★ ★

Some thoughts about this year's class of inductees into the International Boxing Hall of Fame.

We all knew Gennadiy Golovkin was going to get in. That was a given. Everybody else, in each of the categories, was guesswork.

In the Modern Fighters category, I nailed it, picking the three winners: GGG, Antonio Tarver and Nigel Benn.

Among the Non-Participants, where we have five candidates to choose from, with two of them getting in, two of the five I selected (Jimmy Glenn and Dr. Flip Homansky) were chosen. I also voted for referee/judge Jack Reiss and judge Steve Weisfeld. I understand both came close, and my guess is they will get in – most likely in the next year or two. I will keep my fifth choice private, as it could have been any one of the remaining 25 candidates on the list.

In the Observer category, where I, along with TV producer Ross Greenburg were selected last year, I voted for the category's two winners – Alex Wallau and Kevin Iole – as well as three other well-deserving candidates.

In retrospect, I wish Wallau had gotten in last year instead of me. I'd love to wake up tomorrow and find that Wallau – who passed away on October 10 – was indeed voted in last year and I was selected this year, along with my longtime pal, Kevin Iole. I was sure that last year it would be two of the Greenburg/Wallau/Iole trio who would be voted in, not me.

I know Wallau would have been thrilled, had he gotten the call last year. From his perch in Heaven, I know he is smiling, delighted that he has been chosen for boxing immortality.

★ ★ ★ ★

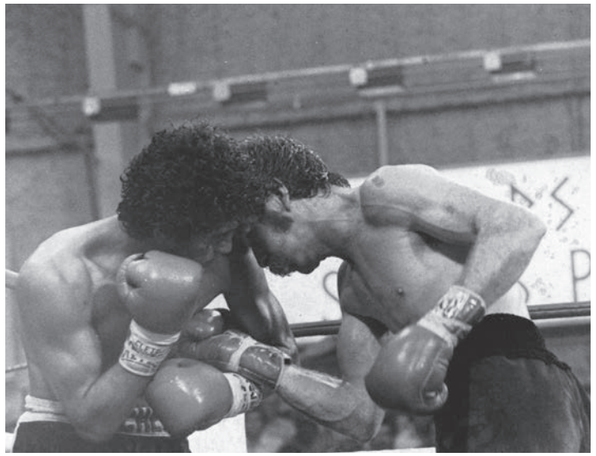
I'm so old that I remember a frightened young ring announcer named Michael Buffer getting his start and watching as he became the centerpiece of every person who has ever stood in mid-ring to introduce each fight to the audience. I was there when he uttered his now world-famous catchphrase, "Let's get ready to rumble," for the first time.

I also watched from ringside around 15 years ago when a booming-voiced young man with dreadlocks yelled, "The fight starts now!" to a live television audience. It's been a pleasure having watched David Diamante become a household name among boxing fans.

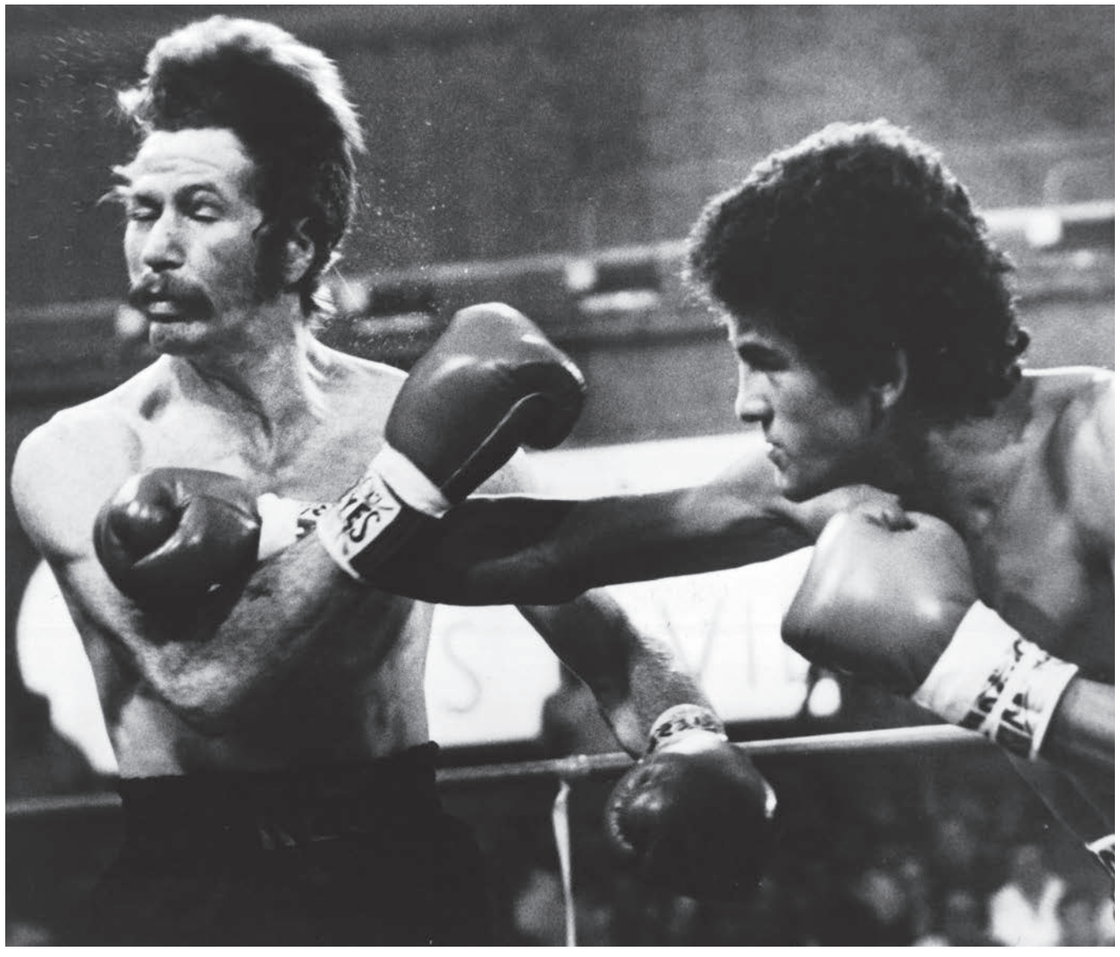
Now, boxing's next-in-line great ring announcer is being embraced by the boxing community. He is New Yorker Matt Competello, whose "Let's take it home" while introducing the main event is already a popular catchphrase in boxing. Competello's good looks, loud (but not overpowering) voice and his outgoing personality have made him a fan favorite throughout the sport. He is also a frequent emcee at sports dinners and functions throughout the country. Most recently, he emceed the Ring 8 Holiday Banquet, a packed affair at the renowned Russo's On The Bay in Howard Beach, New York.

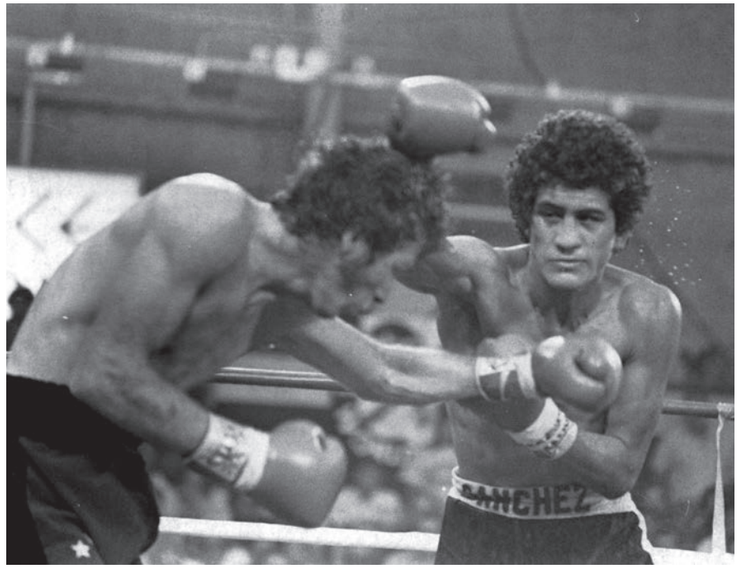
If you have a chance to listen to him, do so. You'll understand why I call him "Marvelous Matt." RING

Omar Vega



THE INVINCIBLE EAGLE:
On June 21, 1980, the ill-fated Salvador Sanchez made the second defense of his Ring Magazine and WBC featherweight titles against the man he'd dethroned, Danny "Little Red" Lopez, at the Caesars Palace Sports Pavilion in Las Vegas. Once again, Sanchez was superior, with his left jab setting up some eye-popping combination work and his defensive finesse limiting the challenger's success. When yet another devastating series of punches from the Mexican hero nailed Lopez in Round 14, referee Mills Lane stopped the fight immediately. Sanchez made seven more successful defenses over the next two years, defeating the likes of Ruben Castillo, Juan LaPorte, Wilfredo Gomez and Azumah Nelson along the way. He died tragically in an automobile accident on August 12, 1982.





FIGHTLINE

BY DOUG FISCHER

Fights only last a matter of minutes, but fighters are connected to each other by chains that extend for decades – even centuries – into the past. Their bond is a lineage built face-to-face: A young prospect struggles with the skills of an aging veteran whose nose was once broken by a fighter now enshrined in the International Boxing Hall of Fame. In that way, muscle memory carries knowledge and boxers face a piece of everyone their opponent has fought, everyone those people fought, and so on.

This month we're linking two standouts from the New South Wales region of Australia – 1970s middleweight contender **Tony Mundine** and Ring/IBF cruiserweight champ **Jai Opetaia**.

Following in the footsteps of bantamweight champion Lionel Rose, Mundine was a popular indigenous Australian who gained worldwide recognition for his fierce fighting prowess.

Mundine notched 80 victories – 64 via stoppage – during a 15-year, 96-bout pro career that took him to France, Italy, Greece, Argentina and Ghana, as well as South Pacific island countries and territories such as Fiji, Papua New Guinea and New Caledonia.

Mundine was blitzed 52 seconds into the opening round of his first bout against a world-level opponent – seasoned Cuban veteran Luis Rodriguez (who held a 104-9 record at the time) – in April 1971, but the 20-year-old up-and-comer won his next 22 bouts. That impressive run carried him to No. 1 in The Ring's middleweight rankings and included top contenders Denny Moyer and Bunny Sterling, as well as faded former champ Emile Griffith, whom he outpointed in Paris in November 1973.

The win streak ended when he faced Philadelphia's "Bad" Bennie Briscoe, who stopped Mundine in five rounds in February 1974. Four bouts and eight months later, a seventh-round stoppage to middleweight great Carlos Monzon in his lone title shot ended his days as a contender, but he fought on for another 10 years.

In 2000, Mundine's son Anthony made headlines when he left rugby league football to pursue a professional boxing career at age 25. Anthony Mundine quickly developed into an attraction and contender at super middleweight, where he won a world title.

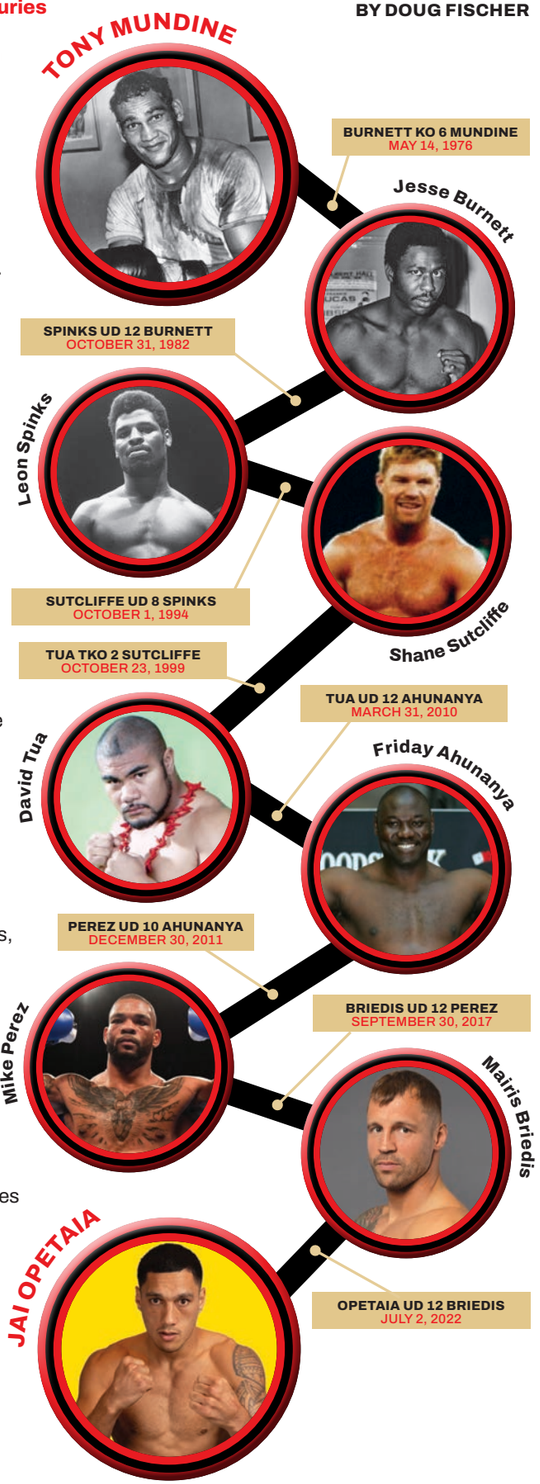
Opetaia (29-0, 23 KOs) is an athletically gifted boxer-puncher of Samoan descent. Although the Sydney-born southpaw was a decorated amateur who represented Australia at the 2012 Olympics, he was unknown to most of the boxing world until he upset rugged cruiserweight veteran Mairis Briedis in July 2022. The hard-fought unanimous decision (Opetaia suffered a severely broken jaw) earned him the Ring Magazine and IBF titles.

Opetaia has made seven defenses of the Ring championship, including a rematch decision over Briedis. The lesser challengers were dispatched in brutal fashion. Opetaia is as mean as he is talented, which may explain why he's had a difficult time getting the other cruiserweight titleholders – Gilberto Ramirez and Noel Mikaelian – to fight him in unification bouts.

There are multiple paths linking the Aussie sluggers, whose primes are separated by 50 years, but we found this seven-boxer Fightline.

Can you find a faster route?

If so, or if you have another Fightline you'd like to submit, send it to comeoutwriting@gmail.com. And remember, some fighters can be linked on paper by jumping forward and backward in time, but to be a true lineage, the fights must come in chronological order. RING



"I came for football, I stayed for more."

— CRISTIANO RONALDO

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In the rapidly evolving Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Konoz initiative was launched in 2023 to celebrate Saudi Arabia's cultural and intellectual creativity. Konoz—meaning "treasures"—an initiative of the Saudi Ministry of Media, embodies the country's commitment to documenting its rich cultural heritage, innovative spirit, and civilizational contributions. Financed by the Human Capacity Development Program under Vision 2030, a plan to reduce oil dependence and diversify the economy by growing sectors like culture and tourism, Konoz's mission is to showcase the many treasures of Saudi Arabia, from its vibrant culture to its breathtaking natural beauty.

Among Konoz's productions is the documentary *Horizon*, currently available on Netflix, which offers a visually captivating exploration of Saudi Arabia's natural wonders through high-quality storytelling and environmental advocacy. Beyond *Horizon*, Konoz has created other notable productions including *Saudi Atlas* and the animated series *Al-Rahebeen*, along with documentary films such as *Ala Hadden Sawa*, *Safraa's Night*, and *The Destination*—broadening global perspectives on Saudi Arabia's urban and social development.

Looking ahead, Konoz plans to continue expanding its portfolio with new projects that further explore Saudi Arabia's natural and cultural heritage. Upcoming docuseries include NEW WONDERS, spotlighting Saudi Arabia's giga-projects; +966, exploring the roots of Saudi identity and its enduring cultural and human legacy; and Beyond Industry, tracing the evolution of the Kingdom's industrial sector over time.

Konoz represents a cultural renaissance that captures the essence of Saudi Arabia's past, present, and future. Through its engaging and insightful productions, Konoz not only documents the Kingdom's hidden treasures but also shares an inspired and woken sense of national pride embodying the spirit and vision of Saudi Arabia's future.

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